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Talking Pleasures, Writing Dialects. Outlining Research on *Schmecka*

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ABSTRACT

This text is written in English so that it may reach an international academic audience. However, if all academic research comes to be outlined in English we are to lose a lot. Here, we argue this by presenting the case of *schmecka*. Drawing on fieldwork done in the Austrian region of Vorarlberg, we suggest that the word *schmecka* differs from the factual ‘flavour perception’ investigated in physiology; from the culturally informed ‘sensory experiences’ explored by anthropologists and even from the sociological ‘tasting in practice’. For one, *schmecka* is shared between modest good food and assembled eaters; two, it draws together the English ‘tasting’ and ‘smelling’; and three, it has positive overtones. This means that using *schmecka* is not just judicious when writing about ‘others’, here the people of Vorarlberg. It also, more interestingly, allows ‘us’ to write in another way: one that foregrounds valuing rather than facting.

KEYWORDS Translation; linguistic practices; tasting; valuing; food

In the spring of 2011 Anna, the first author of this text, at the time a PhD student in Amsterdam, was in Vienna for a few days and went out with two childhood friends from Vorarlberg, the most western Austrian region, where she grew up. After seeing a film they walked over to a *Dönerbude* – a mobile food stall selling what is locally called ‘Turkish food’.

Philipp asks for a Döner Kebab sandwich, Susi for one with falafel and Anna for one with feta.¹ The vendor prepares the sandwiches, hands them over and receives his money. With their treats in their hands, the three friends walk over to a nearby building and seat themselves on its majestic steps. They fold back the paper wrappings and eat. After taking a few bites Susi remarks: ‘*D’Falafel sind irgendwia komisch.*’ In English we might render this as: ‘The falafels are somehow funny.’ This is not a compliment. Philipp looks at his kebab sandwich and says (our translation): ‘Hmm, mine is quite okay.’ Anna reassuringly adds: ‘Yeah, mine as well.’ In between mouthfuls they talk about the film. Philipp finishes first, crumbles his empty paper

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and looks around for a bin. Susi puts a few last pieces of bread, falafel and sauce in her mouth, chews, swallows, leans back and sighs. ‘*Ah, des hot jetzt ab’r guat gschmeckt – I bin scho sooo hungrig gsi.*’

We might translate that last remark as: ‘Ah, that was really good, I was just so hungry’. That would work in English, but it involves some transformations. The ‘jetzt ab’r’ (literally: now but) becomes ‘really’, while the *scho* (literally: already) changes into ‘just’. Most importantly, however, it erases the word *gschmeckt*, a conjugation of the verb *schmecka*. It is hard to know, if only because ‘English’ comes in so many varieties, but we figure that in similar situations ‘that was good’ would be more current than ‘that tasted good’.² This is not the only difference between the use of *schmecka* and *to taste*. In this article we explore several more of these in an attempt to draw some lessons about writing academic texts in English. For in English we write, even though for neither of the present authors this is their mother tongue. Writing in English allows us to be ‘international’. Practically, this means that we put a lot of extra effort into finding words and formulating sentences and always depend on editors for correction and fine tuning.³ In the present text, however, our concern is not with the extra effort needed for our texts to work in English, but with the content that may be lost in translation.⁴

In anthropology it is a truism that people ‘in the field’ use other linguistic repertoires than *we*, the authors of academic texts. Such differences often animate anthropological research, as *their* terms are among the objects of *our* analysis. The impediments to easy translation are spelled out in order to specify local meanings. In line with this tradition, we too will present ethnographic vignettes of moments in which native speakers of the Vorarlberg dialect speak of *schmecka*. Our aim, however, is not to describe the native speakers, but to learn from them. Our concern is with *our* terms. More particularly, it is with the terms in which we cast our analysis and frame our questions.⁵ It is usually assumed to be an academic virtue to solidify such terms into ‘concepts’. Different scientific traditions coin different concepts. Take Susi’s sensuous engagements with her falafels. In neurophysiology these get studied as ‘flavour perception’; in the anthropology of the senses they form ‘sensory experiences’, while in the terms of pragmatist sociology they are a case of ‘tasting in practice’. The pertinence of these different ways of wording may be questioned in English and so we will. But then we take a further step. What, we wonder, if we were to study scenes like the one related above as instances of *schmecka*? What if this Vorarlberg term did not just spice up our ethnographic vignettes, but also served to outline our inquiry?

As others have asked similar questions about terms that they encountered in their fields, we do not claim ground-breaking originality.⁶ We do, however, think that the case of *schmecka* is interesting and that its specificities have something relevant to add to anthropology’s ongoing quest to appreciate otherness. Here is how we stumbled upon it. Anna wrote down fieldnotes of her after-the-film meal because this was relevant to the topic of her PhD research. But what was this topic? In English language sketches it was rendered as ‘daily practices of *tasting*’. Annemarie, acting as Anna’s supervisor, applauded the pragmatist shift implied from the static ‘taste’ – a quality that seemingly resides in a food item and/or a person – to the dynamic ‘tasting’ – an

active encounter between stuff and eater. Anna was in on that shift, but still thought that something was missing. But what exactly? It was hard to say, especially in English, the working language that we shared. All in all, it took us a long time to realise that Anna had actually hoped to study *schmecka*. By then it was too late to change the framing of the thesis and, besides, there was more than enough of interest to write about ‘daily practices of tasting’. However, with the thesis finished and defended, we decided to confront what had gone missing. What exactly was it, what might it be to study *schmecka*? To tackle this question, Anna returned to Vorarlberg to further explore its specificities.

Background

Physiology laboratories invested in ‘tasting’ used to focus on what tongues taste, but more recently have widened out their object to ‘flavour perception’. This is the apprehension of foods and drinks that the human brain composes out of information that comes to it from five senses, those of taste, smell, vision, hearing and touch.⁷ In laboratories where ‘flavour perception’ is studied, research subjects each sit in their own quiet booth, its light and temperature carefully controlled, and are provided with separate, isolated ‘food objects’.⁸ Different versions of ‘flavour perception’ may be configured in this way, but they all take place inside an individual subject-body perceiving delineated food/drink-objects under stabilised circumstances. Research projects pursue such questions as how finely humans may distinguish between flavours; how the colour of glasses and plates affects the way food and drink are perceived; or how long it takes for sensuous triggers to fade out. Sometimes brain imaging techniques are added to find out where and how the brain adds together the information provided by the different senses and fuses this into ‘flavour’.

Anthropologists of the senses argue that such laboratory set ups do not capture what is *really* going on as they strip away the culturally rich meanings of food and drink. They insist that humans are diverse and that different groups of people tend to encounter different foods and drinks in different settings, while drawing on different linguistic repertoires. As a consequence people make sense of their perceptions in different ways and have different so-called ‘sensory experiences’. To illustrate the rich scholarship in this tradition, we here call upon the example of Samburu cattle herders in Northern Kenya, who have five flavour terms: *kemelok* (sweet and generally tasty food), *kesiisho* (salty, like curdled milk), *kesukut* (sour, as in partially fermented milk), *kesagamaka* (partially putrid meat) and finally *ketuka* (tasteless, grey). The first four of these words allowed the Samburu to talk about the meat, blood and milk that they used to live on. Now that population numbers have risen and herds have dwindled, the new staple, imported maize, calls for the fifth word *ketuka*: it is tasteless, grey food.⁹

Pragmatist sociologists approach tasting in yet another way. They focus on situations in which people engage in sensuous encounters with foods and drinks. What do these situations afford, what do they bring into being? An illuminating case, extensively studied in pragmatist mode, is wine tasting classes.¹⁰ In these classes participants are not enclosed in separate tasting booths, but are being offered sips of wine along with animated conversation. Wine tasters-in-the-making learn to roll words (balsamic,

mouldy, geranium, etc.) as well as wine on their tongues while adjusting their own appraisals to those of others. In this way, they gradually attune to differences between vintages and harvests. Seen from a pragmatist point of view, laboratories do not lack social thickness, but craft a quite specific socio-material scenario of their own. This means that laboratories do not find out the truth about ‘the body’ (a universal) to which ‘culturally rich meanings’ (in all their diversity) then have to be added. Instead, laboratories form their own peculiar ‘nature-culture’ that helps to orchestrate particular bodily phenomena into being. Within the lab, tasting is enacted as lonely (as it may be for solitary eaters elsewhere; but is not in wine tasting classes), silent (as it is in some monasteries, but not in most family gatherings) and stabilised (while outside the lab routines tend to be fluidly adaptable).

For the present project we did not orchestrate lab-like tasting-sessions, but study what physiologists might call ‘natural experiments’. We were inspired by impressive diversity of sense-word-constellations that anthropologists have written about, but did not assume that people have ‘experiences’ as they give culturally specific meanings to what their biologically given bodies perceive. Instead, like pragmatist sociologists, we took ‘bodies’ themselves to vary from one situation to another; to be enacted along with the other elements of a practice.¹¹ However, that is not to say that ‘tasting in practice’ was going to be our object of study. As we read the texts about wine tasting mentioned above in the original French, we found that this had not been their topic either. Instead, our French colleagues were concerned with what in French is called *déguster*. In English translations this was rendered as ‘tasting’, but *déguster* is a quite specific, dedicated kind of tasting – the kind, indeed, pertinent to settings such as wine tasting classes. For ‘tasting’ in more mundane situations, the French language has another word: *goûter*. The contrast at hand is not readily available in English, but in the dialect of Vorarlberg it is: *déguster* translates into *verkosten*, while *goûter* is on a par with *schmecka*. This affected our choice of field sites. Anna was going to avoid high end restaurants, cooking demonstrations, wine tasting classes and other sites where *déguster/verkosten* might be going on. She would rather seek out situations locally deemed to be mundane. There, after all, she might find *schmecka* – the practice and the word.¹²

A Collective Practice

In the summer of 2015, Anna stayed for a few weeks with her parents in Vorarlberg and got herself invited for lunch or dinner in six other households in the city of Bregenz and the village Rankweil. Most members of these households were native speakers of the Vorarlberg dialect and Anna had known them since childhood. They were teachers, secretaries, speech therapists, doctors or civil servants. A few were retired, a few were home makers.¹³ Anna explained that she wanted to know about eating and table-talk in Vorarlberg. Her informants joked that then they might have to cook *Kässpätzle*, a dish that tourist guides present as ‘typical for Vorarlberg’. But they did not.

Brigitte Abrederis has welcomed Anna into her kitchen and starts to work. She lays a heap of parsley on a chopping board, chops it roughly, and puts it into a food processor. She adds

walnuts, parmesan and olive oil. And she explains: ‘This will be a pesto, but not with basil and pine nuts ... We always have so much parsley in our garden. And there is the walnut tree standing over there [she points at it through a window] providing us with all these walnuts. So, one day I went online and found this recipe for parsley-walnut-pesto. And since then, we often have this.’ And then she adds: ‘*Und des schmeckt üs eigentlich wirklich.*’¹⁴

There it is: *schmecka*. We might translate Brigitte’s remark as: ‘And it actually tastes truly good to us’. The activity *schmecka* is done by the food (parsley-walnut-pesto) to an us, an eating collective (Brigitte’s family). That *schmecka* involves a collective ‘us’ puts it in contrast with ‘flavour perception’, the ability of individual brains to aggregate flavours out of diverse sensory signals. At the Abrederis table, *schmecka* involves food (that results from the garden, the work of a cook, an internet recipe and handy kitchen equipment) and the assembled family.

Brigitte has put a sieve in the sink. She takes the pot with noodles and boiling water from the stove and empties it into the sieve. Once drained, the pasta goes back into the pot. Brigitte lifts the container from the food processor, opens it, tilts it and pours some of the parsley and walnut pesto over the noodles. She stirs, adds more pesto, stirs again. Then she picks up a fork and uses it to bring a noodle coated in pesto to her mouth. She chews and swallows and then affirms: ‘*Mhm. Passt. Sitzt. Hot Luft.*’ Yes. Good. Fits. Has air.

Here the term *schmecka* isn’t spoken. But as a native speaker of the dialect of Vorarlberg Anna spots the activity. Or, to be more precise, if prompted to describe what Brigitte is doing, Anna would want to say this is *abschmecka* – a probing activity. By her *abschmecka* Brigitte explores whether the pesto is already good enough to serve or needs something extra.

As a dessert Brigitte has prepared a sponge cake that she coated with rum and then covered with a layer of currant yoghurt. As she is cutting the cake, she reveals: ‘I have added a bit of rum to the cake.’ With a smile Lukas, her tall twenty-year old son, comments, ‘*Jo, ih schmeck’s.*’ Yes, I *schmecka* it.

Food may *schmecka* good to *us*. But Lukas, too, may be the subject of this verb and *schmecka* the rum that has been added to the cake. The linguistic possibility is not obvious, it does not occur in all related languages. In Dutch, to add this to the mix, food *smaakt* (a word resonating with *schmecka*) while eaters *proeven* (a term akin to the English *probing* or the French *éprouver*).¹⁵ But back to Vorarlberg.

Brigitte continues: ‘Well, I thought, you are no longer little children ...’ In a tone playfully lingering between deep solemnity and light joking, Lukas responds: ‘I’m working tomorrow!’ Everyone laughs.

It is by jointly eating what Brigitte cooks that the family has become an *üs*, a ‘we’ to whom parsley-walnut-pesto *schmeckt* really good. This ‘we’ is not static. The family did not always like parsley-walnut-pesto, but has gradually warmed to it. The children used to be small, but now they are grown-ups. Brigitte recognises this by putting alcohol, prominent marker of adulthood, into the cake. Lukas, accepting the marker, signals that a bit of rum in his cake is not going to seriously affect him – being adult, he can handle a lot more. At the dinner table, then, *schmecka* is going on, but the family gathering does

not turn around *schmecka*. Other things are going on as well. Care is being provided by the cook and mother; possible tensions are smoothed out by amicable joking; going to work drunk is singled out as something that would disturb the order of the local ordinary.¹⁶

Saying *Schmecka*

During the meals that Anna joined, those assembled around the table talked about events of the day, things that had happened or changed since the last time they all met, shared friends and what they were up to, recent or upcoming holidays, and so on. On and off, as a part of those conversations, or interrupting them, someone would use the word *schmecka*.

Anna joins the Sonderegger family: Sabine, her husband and their two daughters who work nearby and come home for their lunch break. The husband is late and the rest of them start with the vegetable soup. Then they have a *Topfenstrudel*, a strudel made of puff pastry with a filling of fresh cheese, eggs, sugar and vanilla that Sabine baked in the oven. As forks and knives get picked up, the conversation dwells on the rapidly growing General Practitioner clinic across the road. Sabine interrupts this by asking, after the first bite, '*Schmeckt's euch Moatla?*' Does it *schmecka* (taste good) to you, girls? The younger daughter pursues her earlier concerns: 'Well, as a doctor you cannot send people away if they are sick, can you?' Sabine insists: '*Na ... schmeckt's euch Moatla?*' (Same translation – with the *na* for added insistence.) The elder daughter responds: 'Yes, very good.' Sabine specifies her concern: 'Is there too little sugar?' Anna reassures: '*Na, genau richtig. Weil ma's Topfige noh schmeckt.*' No, just right. Because one can still taste the freshness of the cheese.

While the younger daughter dwelt on the intricacies of running a GP clinic, both the elder daughter and Anna humoured Sabine and complimented the food. Sabine asked for this. After spending a long time preparing lunch she was eager to learn if her efforts pleased her daughters and the guest. In English her question might have either been phrased in an objectifying way as 'is it okay?' or in a subjectifying one, 'do you like it?'.¹⁷ *Schmeckt's euch*, by contrast, is a relational expression: the food, active, tastes good (more on that 'good' below) to you, recipients of its taste. The elder daughter confirms, that yes, it does, while Anna, the guest, underlines that 'one' can still *schmecka* the freshness of the cheese that more sugar might have hidden behind excessive sweetness. But if the cook felt free to ask *schmecka* questions, those from her guest made her worried.

The plates are getting emptier. Anna is eager to gather more data and says that she still has a question: '*Schmeckt's hüt andersch wie sunsch imma? Odr hot's andersch gschmeckt?*' Does it *schmecka* differently today than it usually does? Or (as lunch is almost over) *did* it *schmecka* differently? This may be a proper question for a researcher to ask, but, or so it turns out, not for a guest. Both daughters simply say 'no'. Sabine's husband, also present by now, adds that it *schmeckt* just like it always does. 'Tip-top. Very good.' But Sabine is bothered. 'Is it alright for you, Anna?' Anna hastily says: 'Yes, yes, absolutely.' Sabine is not convinced. 'But, maybe for you, you know, maybe you are used to having it cooked differently?' Anna tries to explain her particular, unusual, position: 'No, no. It's just for research. I really like it. The fresh cheese is fantastic!' Sabine is still not convinced. 'Really?' Anna tries another 'Yes, yes'. The husband backs up Sabine and her worries: 'Well, we don't eat it all that sweet.' Sabine adds,

‘I already explained this to her. Because a lot of people like it sweet, but ...’ At which point one of the daughter blessedly shifts the conversation to holiday destinations.

As Anna made inquiries into the way the food *schmeckt*, Sabine didn’t hear an eager researcher probing for information, but rather a hesitant guest seeking confirmation from others that the food was disappointing. No less than three painful rounds of repair work were needed to make amends. Using the word *schmecka*, then, does not always signal something positive. It may also be – or be heard as – part of a probing inquiry of a person who, after her own first impressions, wants to know if others share her disappointment.¹⁸

While in the lab perceiving flavours is a solitary task, Anna sought out field sites where people gather around tables. In line with the anthropology of the senses we find that the words they use make sense of reality in a locally pertinent, culturally salient way. The Vorarlberg word *topfige*, for instance, bespeaks an investment in the freshness of fresh cheese; cows being abundant in the region. But what is being said does not add meaning to bodily sensations, but helps to shape these. This is in line with pragmatist sociology: when Sabine asks whether the *Topfenstrudel schmeckt*, the attention of the eaters shifts to the taste of the strudel they are eating. Yes, now that you ask, I start to notice. The food is good; I like it.¹⁹ However, studies of *déguster* do not pursue how in mundane settings tasting is entangled with other concerns. Sabine’s probing is not just about the food, it rather signals her eagerness to care; Anna’s question if the strudel *schmeckt* like it tends to do, calls up the script of a disappointed guest. Words spoken in a daily life setting, then, may not just refer, add meaning, index or otherwise regard an object under discussion. They may also cause worry, craft connections, praise, signal disillusionment or create confusion that is difficult to repair. The word *schmecka* is a case in point – when spoken, it may achieve a lot.

Getting Noses Involved

So far we have related how the **activity** *schmecka* may attune people to foods while relating them to each other; and how the **word** *schmecka* may work to strengthen or rather to spoil food pleasures and convivial moods. We contend that ‘flavour perceptions’ neither precede nor underlay the events related. Organising them into being would have required a rather different set up than those of Birgitte’s and Sabine’s hospitable tables. The concept ‘sensory experience’, in its turn, does not fit with our analysis as the ‘sensory’ aspects of these meals were so entangled with other things (stilling hunger, giving/receiving care, enacting family life) that they can hardly be separated out. And in Rankweil one may, in the weekend, seek an ‘experience’, but then one packs up to eat out, in the *Gasthaus Mohren*. Anna ate with her hosts on what they called ‘normal days’. On such days people may appreciate their food, but they do not have ‘experiences’.²⁰ Were these, then, cases of ‘tasting in practice’? What went on was not quite *déguster*, nobody was as dedicated as that. Anna’s host families were rather engaged in what in French is called *goûter* – something that is being done, but

that is not central to a practice. It is done in between other things. But why not take their word for it and call the activity of Anna's hosts *schmecka*? To propose this is a way of discrediting the pertinence of solid academic concepts. We might have tried to discredit this pertinence in English. In fact, so far nothing much would have been lost if we had done so, translating *schmeckas* into 'tasting' (adding a 'good' here and there, more on that below). However, in the next few vignettes the word 'tasting' would no longer suffice.

Maria Rauch is preparing fried chicken breasts, steamed vegetables and mashed potatoes; and a chocolate pudding for desert. Anna has given Maria a hand by peeling potatoes and cutting courgettes and pepper. By a quarter past twelve, fifteen minutes before lunch time, everything is ready. Maria's husband, Egon, enters the kitchen, which he had left earlier to avoid 'standing in the way'. 'Oh, I'm hungry,' he comments. Maria, washing the utensils she just used, reassures him: 'Bernhard [their son] should arrive any minute.' Egon nods. Anna takes the opportunity to ask a field work question: '*Kann ma jetzt säga, dass ma's Eassa scho schmeckt wemma herkommt?*' In English (except for the *schmecka*): Might one now say that one already *schmeckt* the food when comes near to it?

Here the word *schmecka* doesn't translate easily. Asking if it is possible to say that one already *tastes* the food when one comes near to it, doesn't work in present day English. We had talked about this in Amsterdam before the fieldwork. After all, Anna grew up in Vorarlberg. She knew very well that *schmecka* may be done from a distance, while *tasting* depends on proximity, on contact between stuff-to-be-tasted and tongue.²¹ In our pre-fieldwork conversations this difference had stood out as intriguing.

Egon answers: '*Jetzt schmeck ih's net. Zwüschatinna han ih's gschmeckt. Wonnar dra gsi sind. Vor anara Schtund ungefähr.*' 'Now I don't *schmecka* it. Along the way, I have *geschmeckt* it. [The *ge-* helps to put the verb in the past tense]. When you were busy. Around an hour ago.' Maria says that this was the moment she was frying the chicken.

What might we learn from Egon's ability to *schmecka* a chicken being fried in the kitchen while he is in his study? If we were obliged to stick to English here, we would have no option but to say that Egon was *smelling* the chicken. This might suggest that the term *schmecka* encompasses two kinds of sensorial engagements – tasting and smelling. But why should 'the human body' have a sense of taste that is separated out from a sense of smell, just because the English language uses two different words here? Why would reality itself be differentiated in this way while the concomitant linguistic cut is not made in the Vorarlberg dialect?

While Maria is in the middle of cooking, the phone rings. It is her daughter who is cooking as well (it is, after all, almost lunch time). The daughter hesitates about the meat that she just took out of her fridge. How to recognise if it is still good or whether it has gone off? Maria says: '*Des schmeckt ma gleich, wenn's Fleisch numma guat isch.*' Or: that is something one *schmeckt* immediately, when meat is no longer good.

In English, one does not taste whether food is spoiled or not, but smells it, so avoiding the need to put it in one's mouth. However, Maria's daughter does not have to put anything in her mouth either, she may *schmecka* her meat without applying her tongue to the task. This doesn't mean that the deviant linguistic repertoire of Vorarlberg

accidentally fuses two perceptive engagements that are in fact different. After all, we didn't write earlier that *déguster* and *goûter* (or *verkosten* and *schmecka*) are *really* two different kinds of activity that English accidentally fuses into the single word 'tasting'. But neither are we arguing that the English language is wrong and that the multisensorial character of flavour perception is much better acknowledged in the dialect of Vorarlberg. Instead, we investigate how different linguistic repertoires make different cuts.²²

Once son Bernhard has arrived, family and guest gather around the table. Anna, in research mode, asks: '*Und kamma jetzt säga, dass ma's Eassa scho schmeckt, bevor ma n'erscht Bissa gnomma hot?*' In translation: is it possible to say already that one *schmeckt* the food, even before one has taken a first bite? Maria seeks clarification: '*Ob's ma ... ob's guat schmeckt?*' If it *schmeckt* good? But this is not what Anna is after. '*Na, dass ma's schmeckt, s'Eassa, wemma no davor sitzt.*' No, that one *schmeckt* the food, when one is still sitting in front of it. Maria affirms: '*Jo, also, ih schmeck's eigentlich scho.*' Yes, I actually already *schmecka* it.

The *scho*, 'already', suggests that the *schmecka* has just started to happen and will go on doing so once Maria puts her food in her mouth, chews and swallows. The continuity implied would disappear if we were to translate *schmecka* into 'smelling and tasting'. For between those two activities there is a rupture. By contrast, in Maria's sentences *schmecka* is not two things, one after the other, but a single ongoing engagement. Or is it? We might want to assert this in an authoritative voice, but at the Rauch family dinner table Anna's question sparks a discussion.

Egon adds: '*Jo, zücht scho i'd Nasa.*' Yes, it already moves up into the nose. In this way, Egon confirms that the nose is an organ that may *schmecka*. This puzzles Verena, the daughter. She asks: '*Schmecka odr riacha, odr?*'

Riacha, imported from High German, where its spelling is *riechen*, translates into English as *smelling*. Here, then, Verena imports an alien – High German – distinction into a conversation that so far unfolded in the Vorarlberg dialect and distinguishes *schmecka* from *riacha*/smelling.

Bernhard doesn't follow up on Verena's question, but introduces (not a coincidence, see below) the topic of the quality of the food. '*Bis jetzt hot's ... isch's imma guat gsi.*' Until now, it has ... it has always been good. Verena persists: '*Riacha odr!?*' Smelling right? After thinking aloud for a bit, Verena finds an interesting way out of her own question: '*Also es schmeckt scho guat, weil ma woaf was oan erwartet. Weil es schmeckt eigentlich immr glich.*' This is her way out, we translate: It already *schmeckt* good, because one knows what to expect. Because it actually always *schmeckt* the same.

In Verena's solution, it is possible to *schmecka* before taking a bite because the smells wafting up from one's plate give a good indication of the tastes of the food-to-be-eaten. That one has eaten the same dishes before, makes it possible to 'taste-forward'. Here, then, the unity of *schmecka* is afforded, not by a particular organisation of bodily perceptions, but by the fact that in the Vorarlberg settings we investigated food constancy is highly appreciated. This makes it possible to anticipate tastes of foods eaten on earlier occasions.²³

Our stories about *schmecka* then, do not provide a lesson about ‘languages’ – as if these were coherent wholes. In their daily lives, people may call upon different linguistic repertoires in conjunction. Linguistic repertoires are not fixed but versatile, they are not closed off to one another but readily mix – especially among people who are multi-lingual. Most native speakers of the Vorarlberg dialect are fluent in High German, as this is the language used in schools, in writing and in interactions with German-speaking people from elsewhere. This, plus linguistic proximity, helps to make the boundaries porous.²⁴ Anna’s questions provoke Verena into a hardly noticeable crossover. She imports the High-German *riechen* into her Vorarlberg sentences, pronouncing it in Vorarlberg mode as *riacha*. With admirable adaptive creativity, she then manages to accommodate the emerging tensions.

Facting and Valuing

As above we have noted in passing, *schmecka* is not a neutral term. A ‘good’ tends to be implied in it, a positive evaluation. This speaks from Maria’s response to Anna’s question if it is possible to talk about *schmecka* food before taking a bite. While Anna was concerned with the possibility of blurring or effacing the smell/taste distinction, Maria’s response was to ask if she meant *ob’s guat schmeckt*, if it *schmeckt* good. In Maria’s ears *schmecka* is primarily a qualifying term and she made this explicit by drawing out a *guat* that may otherwise remain unspoken. It did, for instance, when Brigitte explained that the pesto she often prepares from parsley and walnut ‘*schmeckt üs eigentlich wirklich*’, actually tastes truly good to us. In the Vorarlberg dialect, ‘good’ may be added as a separate word, but it doesn’t need to be. It may also be implied in the *schmecka*. When Sabine asked her daughters and guest: *schmeckt’s euch Moatla?* we therefore felt free to translate this as: does it taste *good* to you, girls? Hence, what is at stake in *schmecka* is the possibility of pleasure; of a sensuous fit between food and eaters. The relevant senses widen out beyond the pentad of taste, smell, hearing, sight and touch.

Christine has seized the occasion of Anna’s visit to invite a group of neighbours. As they gather around the table, she announces that the meal that she has cooked for them is local: the recipe isn’t, but the ingredients are. The celebration of ‘local food’ appears to be as fashionable in Vorarlberg as it is in California or Vienna. The main course consists of noodles made from local spelt, with pesto and salad from the garden. The guests serve themselves from plentiful serving bowls and fill each other’s glasses with wine and water. The conversation shifts from the food at hand, to food in general, to regional food, to food served in the army. By the time most plates are empty, Christine asks: ‘Does anybody want more noodles?’ The guests decline the offer while praising the food with variants of ‘*Isch ganz guat gsi*’ (It has been very good.) Hermann, one of the neighbours, scrapes up the last bits from his plate, takes them into his mouth, chews and swallows. As he puts down his cutlery he sighs deeply. Then he adds: ‘*Hot ganz guat gschmeckt.*’ That has *gschmeckt* very good.

Christine, a generous host, asks her guests if they want more. The guests, in return, underscore their *no* by affirming that the meal was very good. They are satisfied and eating more would not add to their satisfaction. Hermann accompanies his ‘that has *gschmeckt* very good’ with a deep sigh, an indication of what physiologists might call

satiety, the gratification of his belly. Hence, *schmecka* does not only have to do with pleasurable flavours, it may flow over into further food pleasures: feeling satisfied, having stilled one's hunger, being left with nothing more to desire. These perceptions or sensations do not need to be separated out. What matters most is that the food was good. That it *hot gschmeckt*.

The term *schmecka*, then, is evaluative. Its positive resonance may be underscored with an added *guat*, but it doesn't need to be, *schmecka* already conveys appreciation all by itself. In line with this, when speaking the Vorarlberg dialect people never say that something *schmeckt bad*. Instead, when foods give them no pleasure, they use a negative sentence. They talk about **not** *schmecka*.

When Anna eats with the Brunners, the conversation turns to holidays. The Brunner family likes to go to the beaches in France or Italy. They all love the fare cooked up there at the coast, except for Karin. 'Oh, all this seafood ...' Karin begins. Her brother explains: '*Se kann's ned schmecka.*' She cannot *schmecka* it. There is nothing wrong with Karin's perceptive abilities, the point is that she doesn't like seafood. Karin expands: '*Th kann's ned schmecka, hans abr immr schmecka müassa im Urlaub.*' I cannot *schmecka* it, but on holidays I have always been obliged to *schmecka* it. This doesn't mean that Karin is forced to eat fish or mussels: she had to *schmecka* them with her nose. While the rest of the family enjoys the fresh seafood hard to come by in Vorarlberg, a long way from the sea, Karin feels left out. 'Seafood and fish lovers all around, an entire table of them ... I always order Pizza Margarita, something as neutral as possible, to somehow neutralise the smell.'

If all is well, *we* jointly appreciate what is on the table. But collective eating may spoil the food pleasures of people like Karin, who, if her table companions eat sea food, is bound to *schmecka* it too – even though she **cannot** *schmecka* it. It reaches her senses, even though she does not like it. Above we discovered that jointly eating the same meal over and over again may lead on to an appreciative collective, a 'we' liking this or that food. Here we see that, unsurprisingly, individuals may also deviate from the collective – and **not** *schmecka* something that those around them enjoy so much.

There is also a further lesson to draw about outlining research in one linguistic repertoire or another. English has plenty of evaluative words. As it happens, *tasty* calls up something appealing to the senses; while *smelly*, interestingly, something unpleasant. That said, *tasting* is primarily a factual word to which either 'good' or 'bad' may be added as a further qualification. This means that if one sets out to study 'practices of tasting' factual engagements are likely to come first: the cake tastes of rum, Lukas is able to taste the rum. This wine has a balsamic undertone, that is a bit mouldy. Qualifications may come into play, but only in a second instance. They may not even, in processual mode, involve the word 'tasting', but get either attributed to the food – the *Topfenstrudel* is good – or to the eaters – *we* like pesto. By contrast, if one were to set out to study practices of '*schmecka*' valuing would be on the agenda right from the start. The food-eaters relation – this meal *schmeckt* to us – would come to stand in the centre of attention.

There it is: we are able to articulate what was missing. Studying *schmecka* would mean focussing on relational and appreciative practices. The pivotal questions of such a study would be, for one, how – under which circumstances, in which ways, to

which groups of people – foods may offer pleasure; and then, two, how people, in their turn, enjoy their food – its flavours, its trustworthiness, its hunger-stilling qualities, the conviviality it helps to bring about as it is offered by a caring cook, a generous host, to a grateful family or appreciative guests. These questions suggest particular research sites – mundane settings that allow for modest pleasures. And it suggests a conversation with other literatures than those we allude to here. Literatures that do not dwell on perceptions, sensations and linguistic repertoires, but rather on pleasures, appreciations and valuing.²⁵

Conclusion

The case of *schmecka*, just rehearsed, helps to undermine the dream that properly defined concepts allow researchers to join together events from diverse ethnographic settings.²⁶ It suggests that, instead, concepts are bound to carry around the concerns engrained in them when they were coined. The concept ‘flavour perception’ bespeaks the pride of widening ‘taste research’ from one to five senses. It also aims to separate out perceiving flavours from having pleasure. Physiologists studying ‘flavour perception’ painstakingly delegate out pleasure to consumers studies into ‘hedonistic liking’. The concept ‘sensory experience’, in its turn, has been crafted to foreground the meaning-making that enriches bare bodily ‘perceptions’. By stealth, it suggests that people have ‘experiences’ all the time and, what is more, it locates these in their ‘senses’. This does not befit a field in which people make a contrast between their everyday lunches and occasional festive ‘experiences’ and where ‘sensory’ engagements are hard to disentangle from everything else going on. The concept ‘tasting in practice’, finally, risks naturalising ‘tasting’, as if the English word pointed to a universal endeavour. It also helps to make ‘tasting’ too precious, too special. What is more, the insistence on ‘practice’ signals a fascination with practising, doing, getting things done. This may have worked well to widen the earlier narrow focus on knowing, but there are other verbs to consider: undergoing, refusing, caring, eating. And enjoying.²⁷

After having thus pointed out the situated character of the various concepts relevant to research into ‘tasting’, we might try to now propose a better one. But we won’t. Instead, our plea is to let go of the quest for *passe-par-tout* terms altogether. Our plea is for specificity, for words that allow one to write about what is salient here-and-now. This may be the here-and-now of an ethnographic field. For instance, in studying eating in Vorarlberg it makes sense to investigate *schmecka* – not tasting. This may allow one to learn that *schmecka* is relational and pleasurable. It is something that food, cooked especially for them, may do to people; and a way in which people may relate, appreciatively, to food. These activities may go on without being verbalised, but they may also be accompanied by the word. Asking eaters if the food *schmeckt* to them may refocus their attention and increase their appreciation. It may also work to confirm or assuage one’s doubts or disconcertment. One way or the other various words are needed to translate the *schmecka* of eaters into English: tasting, smelling, enjoying one’s well filled belly. If different linguistic repertoires make different cuts, speakers and writers may move between them, trying to accommodate emerging tensions.

Here, however, we did not seek to smooth out tensions. Instead, we draw them out and work with them. Our favourite tension being that the English ‘tasting’ depends on adjectives like ‘good’ and ‘bad’ if it is to value, whereas the Vorarlberg dialect term *schmecka* is appreciative from the start.

This suggests that the salient here-and-now that may propel a researcher to use one word rather than another, does not need to be the geographical region or cultural tradition that she studies. It may also be a concern. And as and when our concern is with what locally are considered to be mundane food pleasures, we may want to study *schmecka*, not just in Vorarlberg, but also elsewhere. This term may be better suited than ‘tasting’ in outlining cases of modest food pleasures and in helping to frame questions about these. Hence, one may ask how a caterer in Amsterdam organises *schmecka* into being when providing breakfast to a film crew on a shooting day; or how *schmecka* takes place in a hospital in Switzerland despite all the urgent life–death stuff going on there; or how in a research laboratory in the UK, while ‘flavour perception’ is brought into being in taste booths, in the canteen there may yet be *schmecka*.²⁸ This, then, is our conclusion. Non-English terms may offer scholars the possibility of telling other stories. Not just stories *about* others, but also, and that is our point, stories that are themselves *other*. Stories that order reality differently than what seems self-evident in English.²⁹ This may be done in many ways; and there are many linguistic resources to draw upon. Here, we just gave an example. We have tried to demonstrate the importance of learning from the particularities of diverse tongues by presenting a humble case, the case of the Vorarlberg term *schmecka*. For the lucky eaters an altogether pleasurable activity and for researchers invested in valuing a truly satisfying word.

Notes

1. Ethnographers tend to make themselves present in their text with the first person singular I. Here, we use the third person singular and a name to underscore that this text is written by a collective author and to increase readability. But if *Anna* is the real name of the ethnographer at work, the other names used throughout this text are invented to assure anonymity. We would not want, e.g. potential new employers using strong search engines to gain undue insights into our informants’ private lives.
2. For a compelling deconstruction of the idea that ‘English’ is a unity, see Makoni and Pennycook (2007).
3. The present text has been patiently cared for various times by John Law, who calls such work his ‘imperialist language duty’.
4. While regional migrants (as so poignantly described in Hofman (1990)) may get lost between the languages of their old and new country, we do too, ‘migrating’ on a daily basis between mother tongue situations and academic English.
5. We took heart from such examples as Strathern’s (1992) using Melanesian words when analysing English kinship; and Viveiros de Castro’s (2009) insistence on the equivocations between versions of reality.
6. See, e.g. *Words in Motion*, tracing words that are locally salient in some region (such as ‘adat/indigenous’ or ‘sekini/responsibility’) as these travel elsewhere (Gluck & Tsing 2009); or the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* that digs up linguistic particularities animating philosophical texts written in different European languages (Cassin 2014).
7. For a spirited popular science introduction, see Shepherd (2012).

8. Anna did field work in two such labs, see Mann (2018). See also Jakobsen (2014). The point of their work is not to provide criticism, but to detail the different *versions* of tasting, or perceiving, or appreciating, that laboratories help to orchestrate.
9. The case of the Samburu we take from Holtzman (2009: 108). It would take an article in its own right to begin to do justice to this field; but see also e.g. Howes (2003), Korsmeyer (2005) and Geurts (2002).
10. The pragmatist analysis of wine tasting we allude to here is that of Teil (2001; 2009) and Teil and Hennion (2004); see also Hennion (2001) on music-lovers. For another way of drawing on wine tasting words to study complex linguistic practices see Silverstein (2006).
11. Here, we build on a long STS tradition, see for an example Mol and Law (2004).
12. For a spirited critique of disentangling 'language' from other ingredients of practices, see Heryanto (2007) – who argues that with the creation of 'Bahasa Indonesian' the English notion of 'language' (and/or its Dutch equivalent 'taal') transformed the meaning of 'bahasa', a word that used to resonate with 'culture'.
13. Some earlier commentators of this text wanted us to specify the 'social class' to which our informants belong. However, 'class' is another word that does not transport well between settings. Social differentiations in the largely rural, relatively well off, region of Vorarlberg (with lots of green-left voters) are real enough, but don't readily map onto those pertinent to, say, Manchester or Detroit. Note also that our highly educated informers speak the local dialect, which in some other countries might be a 'lower class' thing to do.
14. For reasons of readability, we only write out sentences or parts thereof in Vorarlberg dialect if *schmecka* figures as a part of them. Vorarlberg spelling is not taught in schools, so Anna took some freedom here.
15. An older version of English still retained this word as 'smec'; Scandinavian languages talk of 'smag' or 'smak'. Here, we leave that aside, as our text is not about 'languages' and the meanings they carry, but about particular situations and what may be said as a part of them.
16. See also Sonja Jerak-Zuiderent's suggestion that laughter may indicate things feared because of their alterity (2015).
17. English families tend to shift between these tropes, with parents being allowed to state what *is*, while children are only allowed to express their personal *liking* – see for this analysis Wiggins (2014).
18. Here we build on conversational analysis that show that praising food may work as a compliment for the cook (Wiggins & Potter 2003); and that disappointed eaters tend to seek confirmation from others (Wiggins 2014).
19. Focussing on the sensual pleasures afforded by one's food is used as a technique to avoid 'over-eating'. See Vogel and Mol (2014) and Vogel (2017).
20. For an analysis of the Englishness of the notion of 'experience', see Wierzbicka (2010)
21. With others we had written an article challenging this, arguing that in eating with fingers one might want to say that the *fingers* taste (Mann *et al.* 2011). And as the anthropology of the senses taught us: in the Greek spoken on the island Kalymnos smells and sounds fuse, so that when local parlance is translated into English it is as if people encourage each other to 'Listen to this smell!' (Sutton 2001: 99)
22. For an eating-related example see Strathern (2012) that responds to Mol (2014), which follows the trail of the Dutch word *lekker*. For the point that even 'eating' is not universal, see Van de Port and Mol (2015), which explores the contrasts between *chupar* and *comer* fruits in Bahia.
23. Others have remarked that tasting foods may call up rich memories of special occasions (see e.g. Sutton 2001); here we add that routines may afford predictability and help to tame futures.
24. For explorations into multi-lingual mixtures and the argument that in real life practices people do not speak 'languages' but draw on 'linguistic repertoires', see Pennycook (2012).
25. For the way appreciating may be studied in cases where there is *no talk*, see Pols (2005).
26. See for this also Yates-Doerr's argument that 'meat' does not necessarily come from animals (2015b); while the 'insects' that scientists from Wageningen hope might solve global hunger are not a universally salient category (2015a).

27. See for attempts to move beyond ‘practice’ Bertoni (2013) and Abrahamsson *et al.* (2015).
28. All these examples happen to figure in Anna’s thesis (Mann 2015a); for the case of the hospital, see Mann (2015b).
29. This may be more obviously the case for terms that come from more distant tongues (see e.g. Law and Lin (2016) who explore how the Chinese term *shi* may be used in science and technology studies). But *schmecka* reconfirms that ‘within’ Europe, there is ample alterity, too.

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