Talking About Taste: How the Description of Food Means and Does[1]

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0. Abstract

Humans' relationship with food is a much-explored frontier in philosophical, sociological and anthropological research. Micro and macro level examinations of domestic eating habits, cultural attitudes toward food consumption, and contemporary global foodways reveal striking aspects of social organization. Though the dominant research paradigms in these domains have been influenced by structural linguistics, far less attention has been paid to humans' relationship with food from the perspective of linguistics proper. While anthropological linguists have considered taxonomies of food sources and terms describing methods of food preparation, still more provocative insight resides in the examination of taste description across human languages. The lexical field of taste is a unique consideration in light of the perception taxonomies pioneered by Berlin and Kay (1969), and proves to be dissimilar from other perception taxonomies for still more interesting reasons- on one hand due to the physiological complexity of the gustatory system, and on the other due to the culturally situated relevance of dietary habits to taste description across languages.

The present study is a general exploration of the universals and variables that bear on any cross linguistic account of taste description, and an overview of the various means by which taste experiences are reported in natural language. It will be shown why the taste lexicon is itself incomplete, and demonstrated through basic corpora that taste description relies heavily on items from lexical domains other than that of taste. Based on this phenomenon, culturally variable patterns in the use of descriptive metaphor will be revealed across languages. Finally, the description of taste will be contextualized with respect to its pragmatic significance in a variety of discourse environments. These taste descriptions reveal that linguistic communities communicate through shared conceptualizations, which make sense of abstract perceptions in terms of things relevant to the community itself. Taste descriptions thus signify dually, according to the "dual" meaning of taste: on one hand as the report of a physiological experience, and on the other as a reflection of shared judgments, values and desires.

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1. Introduction

Humans' relationship with food is a much-studied and vast resource for progress in all the human sciences. This is the case for a few reasons. Food is the most basic of human needs: the progression of life is presupposed by humans' ability to acquire it. It is a physical necessity that has guided the evolution of man and civilization, and an entity that beyond this bears spiritual and philosophical implications. Beyond the individual, we see that its necessity- its presence or absence- becomes for man, a social animal, a social concern. The systems of relationships and beliefs that define a society and culture reveal themselves through food: a culture's diet is not only a reflection of its environment, but also of the agreement between its members about their relationship with that environment. Eating habits, governed by tacit and explicit rules of permission and prohibition, inclusion and exclusion, by extension define the groups that obey them. Cooking habits- "grammars" of the kitchen and cuisine, as Levi-Strauss (1964) has demonstrated, are metalanguages laden with cultural universals. The same goes for the dinner table itself, where according to Mary Douglas (1966, 1972), an examination of 'who-eats-what-when' reveals underpinnings of our social organization in a codified, readable structure. All of this points toward what Roland Barthes (1975) eloquently summarizes- that food is a vehicle for human communication on a variety of symbolic levels, and something we can therefore "read" to understand people. *Food as language* has thus been the analogy by which anthropologists like those aforementioned, especially those working in the tradition influenced by structural linguistics, have utilized the communicative nature of food for the insight it provides into human social organization.

Considerably less attention has been given to humans' relationship with food from within the domain of linguistics proper, where a great deal of information lies to be discovered through another approach to the subject. If it is worthwhile to examine how *food* communicates information about *people*, it should be just as interesting to consider how *people* communicate about *food*. How humans use language to name, describe and discuss the entities closest to them is an open window into how we conceptualize and codify the world. The specific linguistic relationship between humans and food is an exemplary subject to consider, for at least a couple of reasons. On one hand is the fact that humans need to communicate with each other about food extremely often and for a variety of different purposes. On the other hand that food, like language, has a very unique relationship with the human body and mind. While countless philosophers have described language as an act of "externalizing the internal," Brillat-Savarin notes in The Physiology of Taste (1825) that eating is the reverse- an act of internalizing the external. All that which psychology and biology investigates reflects that this act is mediated cognitively, through the perception of taste.

Tastes are perceived, evaluated and judged by people all the time. These perceptions, and the values we associate them with, signify on the individual and social levels: Rozin and Vollmecke (1986) demonstrate that taste preference is a highly personal psychological factor that correlates greatly with individual development. At the same time it is clear that it is the preferences of *groups* that shape the culinary and dietary identity of a culture (a principle which has to do with both psychobiology's effect on individual taste development, as well as the cultural formation of beliefs). The perception and evaluation of taste has implications in aesthetics as well, where the manipulation of flavor in cuisine is a creative act, in itself worthy of an altogether different set of

judgments and evaluations- we in America are at a point where it is possible to study not just gastronomy, but "Food Writing" as well. What emerges as crucial in the examination of how people talk about food is to consider that food is commodity, and is thus subject to a variety of descriptions suited to meet many kinds of pragmatic ends in emergent global contexts. Our linguistic evaluations are tied, in this sense, not only to our embodied, cognitive and perceptual interface with what we consume, but with our use of these evaluations within society.

The language we use to categorize the perceptible world has been a concern of philosophers, psychologists, anthropological linguists and semanticists for some time, and has not been accounted for without controversy. Solving problems in the language of perception is complicated by different theoretical frameworks on either side of Whorf and Sapir-Whorf's linguistic relativity hypotheses, and the subsequent variations thereof. Regardless of their stance with respect to the relationship between Language, perception and cognition, a variety of these accounts are well-developed and worth revisiting. Most all are connected, theoretically or experimentally, with taxonomies- how things are classified linguistically from language to language. Theories of taxonomy and its relationship to cognition and culture demonstrate striking patterns, which have reinforced numerous (and often incompatible) theories of language and mind.

Much of psychology and cognitive science has accounted for language's representation of conceptual structures by demonstrating that the words human beings use to refer to what they experience demonstrate a great deal about the mind. Following the seminal color term research of Berlin and Kay (1969), contemporary researchers and theorists (Rosch 1971, 1972, 1973; Lakoff 1987) have grounded their work in prototype theory. This posits that our descriptions of

the perceivable world are based on perceptual "focuses" that all humans fundamentally perceive. Within this framework, these perceptual "prototypes" are at the bottom of taxonomies across all human languages- from the names of colors to the words for types of objects. Lakoff wishes to demonstrate that human language is bound to the "experiential" relationship between humans and their environment. Since all human bodies are wired identically, we are all identically equipped for experiencing the world: linguistic universals in categorization thus reveal universals of human cognition (15).

This Universalist framework (especially in its stronger versions) however fails to recognize the important cultural dimension in constructions of meaning and classification, which is particularly relevant to our study of food and taste. From within a neo-whorfian framework, Ana Wierzbicka aptly reminds us that "there is a very close relationship between the life of a society and the lexicon of the language spoken by it" (1997:6). The exceptions and incongruities in naming across languages- the "untranslatable" words and concepts- are for her evidence of a weaker form of linguistic relativity, and we must keep them in mind. It may be the case, according to relativist theories, that things in the perceivable world are categorized and described not based on the universals of perception, but by the selection of "best exemplars," which can be decided on by cultures. The paradigm has demonstrated differences in how abstract domains such as time, spatial orientation are conceptualized across languages.

Each of these two approaches also demonstrates a variety of weaknesses. Almost all of the field research that has attempted to elicit universals in categorization, including that of Berlin and Kay (Tribushinina 6) has had some methodological flaw, while studies seeking to demonstrate contrary evidence are generally based on anecdotal exceptions rather than full-scale surveys.

Moreover, the problem of embodiment reigns over both of these issues: no matter how closely observed, no speaker of any single language (especially a monolingual one) will ever have *true* access to a given concept from the perspective of the speaker of a different language.

A glance at an American restaurant menu offers descriptions of food options that include: *savory, mouth-watering, succulent, sassy* and *bold.* Considering these reports and the context in which they appear, we shall contextualize the following discussion as an examination of what lexical resources a language can have to report on perceptions in the domain of taste, what they mean, and how they are used. We do so while appreciating that that taste is a physiologically universal human ability, which is language-independent. At the same time, we will have to bear in mind Sapir's famous claim that "vocabulary is a sensitive index of the culture of a people," and remember that the vocabulary used to describe food is especially culturally sensitive. From here we can begin to see what comparative semantics and pragmatics demonstrates about part of the relationship between language, environment, culture and mind. A few of the key questions that currently challenge the researchers working on the language/taste frontier may serve as particularly clear inroads to the matter[1]. What about taste is hard to encode linguistically? What means of referring *make up* for these gaps, and how are they pragmatically charged? Along which domains does the representation of taste vary crosslinguistically? And finally, what do these variations demonstrate about the nature of the perception and the role of culture in their encoding?

1.2 Taste and taste descriptions

How do we talk about how things taste and what do we mean when we do? This depends largely on who is doing the talking. The way music is composed of various frequencies combined in interesting and unique patterns, food and cuisine is made up of a similar patterning- of tastes. To this end, people describing music will generally not set about doing so by saying that a Bach fugue "had a lot of D-flats in it." D-flats, with other notes, do however comprise the structure of the piece itself. Although taste science and psychophysics say that there are few actual *tastes*, speakers can still make use of an incredibly large and diverse vocabulary when describing the foods and drinks they consume.

All humans are anatomically and neurologically equipped to perceive tastes the same. The sense is regulated chemically by receptors on the tongue, which in concert with the brain can recognize the differential thresholds between what most people, including gustation science experts, refer to as the "basic" tastes, as well as their respective suprathreshold features (e.g. concentration and intensity). These basic tastes are referred to as *bitter, sweet, sour, salty*, and the more recently recognized *umami.*

With respect to taste term taxonomies and flavor lexicons, English "uses" only four or five words to describe "fundamental" tastes, which are identical to those used in the scientific domain: they are *bitter, sweet, sour* and *salty*, as well as the lesser used *umami*. These are the words which in English correspond to the basic poles of our gustatory system: all human tongues and brains are wired for perceiving tastes, whose properties are distinguished linguistically in English with these five words. It is necessary to state that in English, actual-language use of these terms do not strongly correspond with their definitions as established within the realm of gustation science: while those concerned scientifically with the perception itself define the terms chemically

(according to factors of specific chemical concentrations within stimuli), the use of these terms in regular discourse is not necessarily coincident. Robinson (1970), for example, elicited judgments of untrained tasters, who used *sour* and *bitter* to judge lemon juice with almost equal frequency. He concludes that many speakers do not linguistically discern tastes according to the five taste distinction proposed by psychophysics (perhaps due to a lack of "scientifically" bitter food in their diets, or perhaps because individual tastes differ). These speakers judge generally unpleasant tastes as *bitter*, even where the taste is, *chemically* speaking, something else (from Backhouse 1994:11). O'Mahoney and Ishii (1987) as well as Erickson (1998) propose that this and other discrepancies between actual language and taste science may reflect a need to revisit and potentially redefine the four/five-taste distinction made by psychophysics.

Given the existing debate over the meaning of "basic" taste terms, we better recognize the means by which we refer to taste colloquially. We can consider the use of taste adjectives like *minty, meaty, refreshing* and *decadent* as evidence for the "improvised" nature of making meaning within the domain: for lack of a robust taste vocabulary, we implement descriptions whose meanings depend on other things in the world that we know about, and feelings whose meaning we share.

The inexact nature of our taste-naming habits additionally points to the fact that taste is simply difficult to encode linguistically- for reasons which are the subject of research from psychology to neurophysics to historical linguistics. *How* taste emerges as a unique sense is the subject of the next section, and this comes with some speculation as to why taste comes with such a small lexicon. Some of these reasons are thought to be psychophysical, and others can be understood through philosophical and historical conceptions of the sense, many of which deem it to be

"inferior" to the others. Specific investigations into this are beyond the scope of this work, but an overview will hopefully lead to a sound conclusion: taste poses exceptional challenges when it comes to taxonomies of perception adjectives.

1.3. Taste as a unique perception

Understanding the variations that occur between perception taxonomies and within taxonomies of taste perception also requires understanding a few things about taste itself. In the case of taste, there are aspects unique to the sense that account for the variety of descriptions, and inconsistent application of terms mentioned above, which are found crosslinguistically. The act of tasting (not the sense of taste) is more physiologically complicated than seeing color (Behrems, Ziem et.al: 2008). Unlike with perceiving color, perceiving a taste necessarily employs information gathered by olfactory and tactile resources- i.e. we smell and feel the food we eat just as much as we taste it as it is ingested. For this reason, some linguists reserve use of the word *taste* to refer strictly to that which is interpreted by the gustatory system, favoring the term *flavor* for discussion of general food descriptions: *flavor,* in this case, refers to the intersection of all olfactory, textural, gustatory and trigemenial sensations (Behrems & Ziem: 2008). So it happens that this cooperation of various perceptual stimuli bears directly on the size and variability of the lexicon encountered when discussing taste: it is the case in English and other languages that words are necessarily borrowed from these nearby sensory domains to describe tastes beyond use of the five fundamental descriptions. Additionally, especially in the case of olfaction, mechanisms of semantic extension are already at work within these domains themselves, all of which manifest themselves in the extended taste lexicon.

Ultimately, as we will see, flavor can be a serious problem. For a variety of reasons (not all of which are understood), we have significantly fewer resources to describe gustation and olfaction than we do for other senses. The classic view is that taste and smell are the "lesser" of our senses, which philosophers from Augustine to Hegel have argued are "less valuable" in that we don't use them to make theoretical insights or deductions about the world (Korsmeyer 35). True or not, it is reasonable to imagine that being able to describe the specific saltiness of a potato chip is not essential to human survival, and thus our languages to describe taste didn't develop as extensively. Asking a lay eater (or even many chefs) to describe how something tastes can demonstrate this, and is captured in the following dialogue (from Fine):

GAF: What is something that you really like?

DOUG: Stuffed green peppers are really good.

GAF: Why do you like them?

DOUG: The flavor of green peppers.

GAF: How would you describe that? What is it about green peppers that you like?

DOUG: I like fresh vegetables. I like green peppers.

GAF: How would you describe it to someone who's never had one?

DOUG: I don't know how I would describe it. I wish it was something easier like fish or something. I have no idea.

Needless to say, there is a lot that we cannot do when it comes to referring to specific tastes, and Brillat-Savarin notes that this lexical "poverty" would be near impossible to overcome with a universal agreement. We will see that there are many more options, and even some agreement, when referring to tastes indirectly.

The most important factor that sets taste descriptions apart from all other perceptual descriptions is that taste description is coincident with food consumption. This means to say that every language reflects a culture's own conception of taste- a conception that is inextricably bound with its diet. Just as each culture and cuisine will have its own definitions of what is "good" or "not good" to eat, subsequent judgments on what foods are *salty* and which aren't will be affected, and so on. Bertino et al (1983) is one of many studies that demonstrate this: they analyzed the differences between East Asian and American tasters asked to judge the intensities of sucrose (and other flavors) in identical foods, finding that the East Asian group defined the same taste as far more intense. We can easily imagine that to an average American, the description *spicy* will be applied in different circumstances than its equivalent in languages of Southeast Asia, where spicy foods are more widely consumed.

A similar principle will explain the existence of taste descriptions that are unique to certain languages. Words like *xian* (1st tone), likened to umami, is a fundamental descriptor in Chinese, but used in very pointed circumstances to describe the taste of monosodium glutamate or "simple protein molecules," a description natural and relevant to the taste of many Chinese foods. Not to mention the Indonesian/Malay term *pahit*, which, sometimes mistranslated as *bitter*, has denotative applications to things as particular as "a cup of tea with less than one inch of sugar stirred into it," or "a cup of fruit juice with less than two inches of sugar stirred into it" (David Gil, p.c.). The Taiwanese taste description known simply as *Q*, or *QQ*, has been a subject of food writers' attention: American consumers will best relate the sense of the word to tapioca pearls in bubble drinks, but for Taiwanese speakers, *Q* describes a much more complicated structure of taste and texture, which makes it largely incommensurable in translation. One writer describes

eating aged cuttlefish, noting "It tastes like old shoes, garlic, soy sauce, and the sea and, yes, bounces nicely when I push it against my molars before sliding smoothly apart as I ease my jaws together: the perfect *Q* experience" (Tribur 48).

Regional diet and customs clearly bear on our ability to understand novel taste terms, as well as apply common ones. Since culinary standards are not universal, this fact has particularly interesting implications given the highly globalized foodways of modern society. With the movement and global popularization of cuisines once consumed only in particular regions (the placement of which is rigorously calculated by production and marketing industries), the description of the same foods in distinct regions is a telling marker of the relationship between language and diet.

We see vaguely that many classifications of gustatory stimuli are to some extent predicated on a culture's own environment, needs and beliefs. But to what extent have universals of taste perception been defined across languages and cultures? It has already been mentioned that the principle has been much more easily tested in the domain of color perception. The work of Berlin and Kay (1969), demonstrates a crosslinguistic agreement in the naming of fundamental or "landmark" colors, and a general facility among speakers to acquire new color terms, provided they corresponded to some fundamental landmark. This study is the hallmark that has guided much subsequent work in psycholinguistics and cognitive science, where much less attention has been paid to taste naming across languages.

1.4. Studies in taste naming: cross-linguistic universals and mismappings

The past and present of taste taxonomy research demonstrates a similar balance of agreement and variation among the fundamental descriptors mentioned, which are imposed over an innately fixed psychophysical background. In the domain of taste, where very little work in semantics has actually been done and much of the anthropological literature on perception and taxonomy is antiquated, there is still a demonstrable predominance of the same five basic taste terms, which signify equivalently across most modern, widely spoken languages. The initial groups of studies in this domain were performed in the early years of the 20th century, notably by Myers (1904), Chamberlain (1903), and Rivers (1905), most of which concerned the taste vocabularies of remote, "primitive" populations and languages.

Myers (1904) attempted to elicit the words used by speakers to describe solutions of quinine, salt, acid, and sugar. Though his methodology must be questioned (because the use of such solutions may have been incongruous in a cross-cultural setting), he concluded there is less differentiation between the terms used than found in English when speakers described these tastes. He notes that *sweet* and *salty* tastes were described simply as *good-tasting* (a trend found in many languages); *salty* and *sour* were frequently confused; and that there was no expression accounting for *bitter*. In research performed through questionnaires distributed to informants in other remote populations, Myers reports finding several languages with only two taste words, corresponding respectively to agreeable and disagreeable flavors. Additionally, there was frequently a common word for *salty* and *sweet*, and there were frequent confusions between *salty* and *sour* and between *salt* and *bitter* (1904:119, cited by Backhouse 1994:6). Somewhat to the

contrary, in his study of the Todas of South Asia, Rivers (1905) encountered distinct terms for each of the four categories, he too noting confusion in the distinction between *sour* and *salty*.

Though they are also few, more contemporary crosslinguistic studies on taste vocabulary make valuable claims as well. To the present discussion, some of the most relevant work belongs to Lehrer (1975; 1983; 2007), who has demonstrated the vastness of the English taste vocabulary, especially with respect to wine description. Her semantic analyses are valuable, on the one hand because they trace how the vocabulary is expanded by words being borrowed from non taste domains (i.e. via metaphor), and on the other reflects on this as a means of aesthetitizing speech and refining a vocabulary within a community of experts. Kuipers (1984) studied Weyewa and determined that there were seven basic terms- *bitter, bland, sour, sweet, salty, pungent* and *tart.* In the context of folk ritual, the taste terms are extended such that *bitter* signifies "prohibited" while *bland* is "permitted." These findings led him too to propose a distinction between the gustatory qualities as established by science and by natural language.

Ishige (1983) proposes the taste term problem in terms of some of its cultural groundings, and seeks the patterns in taste vocabulary which relate to culture. His work in Ponapean demonstrates that the language denotes *sweet* and *bitter* as a basic opposition that correlates with "ripe" and "unripe." In Galelan, the terms for sweet, sour, salty, and hot correspond to "good tasting" only if they are in exactly appropriate amounts (which are not subjective to the taster, but generally agreed upon). In Alatonian Turkish, the words for sour, salty, hot, acid, and bitter are ranged over by additional terms meaning "harsh" and "pungent." A similar finding was made of some

Polynesian languages by Myers, where one term referred to tastes of salt, sour or bitter, describing their common "harsh" sense (in Backhouse 1994: 10).

O'Mahoney has studied the relationship between the taste terms of English and other languages, again signaling toward important differences in culture and conception. O'Mahoney and Muhiudeen (1977) demonstrate some interesting mismappings between English and Malay, which makes use of complex variations of the term *masin* (*salty*), which is modified in form to signify very specific distinctions: "salty like sea water," "salty like salt", "salty like soy sauce," and "salty, obnoxious." (Backhouse 1994:11).

All things considered, a great deal of widely spoken languages, including and not limited to Afrikaans, Arabic, Albanian, Chinese, Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Indonesian, Irish, Italian, Japanese, Maori, Nepali, Oromo, Papua, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Samoan, Sanskrit, Scotch, Serbo-Croatian, Slovak, Spanish, Swahili, Swedish, Tagalog, Urdu, Vietnamese, and Yiddish still have linguistic representation of *bitter, sweet, sour, salty*, and, in most cases, *savory* or some equivalent term, which for these purposes we can equate to the umami taste. As mentioned, these representations occur with a somewhat predictable variation. In some exceptional cases, for example in Basque, one word only is used to describe *bitter* and *sour* together, and there are often idiosyncratic additions of words meaning *bland* or *hot/spicy*, as in Korean and Chinese (Erikson 2008).

Specifically defining these terms in each language is, again, difficult to do on such a sweeping basis, for two reasons: for one, they will always be subject to subjective variability on the level of the individual; second, the definitions are subject to the foods the taste words are used to

describe. When the aforementioned pioneer studies approached the taste taxonomies of a language, they did so by mostly by collecting informants' reactions to a taste stimulus. They are helpful in that in them we recognize that speakers separated by language and diet still perceive taste uniformly, even where descriptions of perceptions differ. Each language additionally has a taste term which corresponds by definition to "good tasting" (*sweet)* and "unpleasant tasting" (*bitter),* and the use of either term in languages with no other basic terms is subject to some cultural subjectivity. If a language has a taste term for the salty taste, it nearly always means "tasting of salt." When we look to the lexicalized "dictionary" definitions of taste terms across modern languages, we find that most all tastes are also by definition associated with an emotional sensation that is pleasurable or unpleasant, and/or a prototypical food item. These emotional sensations are captured by some languages quite robustly, such as in Malay expressions for salty and more which we will see. Prototypical food associations are also consistent across the most widely-spoken languages: sweetness is defined as tasting of sugar or honey, saltiness with salt, bitterness with quinine or coffee, and sourness with acid or vinegar.

It goes without saying that most eaters don't think about quinine or acid when they taste something bitter or sour. Looking to prototypical foods and their taste associations from language to language is an important alternative methodology. Backhouse (1994) among others employ this standard by surveying speakers' judgments as to "what x tastes like," and "what tastes [sour, bitter, salty, etc]." This reveals important cultural subjectivities with respect to diet. In Kayardild, a language of Australia, the taste of honey is "greasy, fat or rich," not sweet (Schlaeger and Stedman 175). O'Mahoney and Alba (1987) demonstrate confusion in use of the term *agrio* in North American Spanish, which their subjects associate with "orange peels," as

opposed use of *acido*, the sour taste of citric acid. The terms for *sweet* are in many places connected to fruit nectar as well as sugar, such that Malay of Indonesia has a fairly discrete sweet/bitter continuum with respect to sugar contents.

1.5 Accounting for natural language

Looking past some now established basics of taste taxonomy, we can look to the fact that, in English, *bitter, sweet, sour* and *salty* are the words that most *infrequently* appear when people actually communicate information about taste (Backhouse 1994: 15). Reading any popular wine magazine may not tell us that a particular port wine is *sweet*, but will tell us that it is *"silky...long...*and *brawny."* Nor will the back of a bag of gourmet potato chips indicate that the product tastes *salty,* while it will give away that it tastes "*crispity...succulent...*and *tater-liscious*."

For now it should remain clear at least that 1) descriptions of taste vary crosslinguistically, and are couched in socio-cultural norms. And 2) that despite a small set of words designated for the psychophysical (scientific) evaluation of certain tastes, we employ a much more vast vocabulary when actually describing food. From here, I first propose a surveying explanation of the semantic systems that govern *how* taste descriptions, basic and otherwise, come to mean anything at all. Later, I will look at where non-basic taste words come from and how they reach the domain of taste.

In a subsequent section I will examine how these descriptions actually serve speakers' needs and are deployed pragmatically in different realms of communication, like those seen above. Finally, I will contextualize taste description cross-culturally/linguistically, introducing our linguistic

relationship with food as a significant, underexamined component of humans' highly structured relationship with food in general.

2. How are the meanings of taste words constructed?

The semantic theory of Lyons (1963), revisited by Cruse (1980) is the paradigm most often used for the few existing studies of taste words within semantics proper. Backhouse (1994) gives a helpful summary of the program before directly applying it to Japanese taste words, and is the basis for this summary.

These analyses are based on the theory of the semantic field- which is defined as the set of words that make up a conceptual domain. Here we are referring to the lexical field of taste. Within a given semantic field exists a system of relationships, intralingual and extralingual, which both contrast its members with other items in the lexicon/field and relate it to the nonlinguistic world at large. The intralingual principles that define a word can be paradigmatic or syntagmatic. The former refers to the relationships between words which may occur in the same linguistic context, and are of the same syntactic class. These paradigmatic relationships that establish the meaning of the word intralingually are the familiar distinctions of inclusion and exclusion by antonymy, synonymy, hyponymy, complementarity, incompatibility, etc. Consider the following examples:

1a This apple is sweet

1b This apple is sour

2a This apple is sweet

2b. This apple is crisp

Why can examples 1a and 1b not be used to describe the same apple, while examples 2a and 2b can? *Sweet*, *sour* and *crisp* belong to the same semantic system and relate to one another by different paradigmatic relationships of synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, etc. The relationship between these particular words is one of incompatibility, such that when either *sweet* or *sour* is collocated with the noun *apple,* one will imply the exclusion of the other, while neither one excludes *crisp*.

Beyond meanings established intralingually, words mean nothing if they don't mean with respect to the world at large. By this token, the word *sweet* that exists in the system of taste words that also contains *sour, bitter* etc and collocates with *apple* means differently than *sweet* which exists in the system that also contains *nasty* and collocates with *person.* In a more narrow sense, the same principle allows us to distinguish the meaning of *crisp* when it refers to an apple, as opposed to *crisp* when it refers to a diet soda- and sets the both of them apart from the meaning of the *crisp* when used to describe a performance, or a newly laundered shirt.

It may by now be clear that the intralingual and extralingual relationships that define words hinges drastically on the cultural knowledge of speakers. The size of a particular lexical field varies from domain to domain and from language to language (Backhouse 17). Languages whose speakers are familiar with seafaring can have many terms to describe different kinds of boats, and lack the variety of terms that another language may have in describing something like cattle. This applies as well to languages "within" languages. Professional wine tasters, for example,

have a vocabulary with a large number of adjectives to describe the characteristics of wine, where one adjective such as *strong* (a term that refers to the taste of alcohol) relates paradigmatically to a variety of other adjectives like *fragile, robust, delicate,* or *forceful.* Agreement upon the meanings of these terms is fixed such that, in speech between experts themselves, an anomaly is produced by the description "(#) this wine is *fragile* and *robust*" (1983). Interestingly, the system that defines meaning for experts is undefined for non-expert speakers, who do not agree when producing or identifying the adjectives that describe the taste and smell of wine.

This framework allows us to interpret how taste words, whether "basic" or borrowed from one or another lexical field, refer to tastes themselves. But since these descriptions frequently come from words not native to the domain of taste, we must look to where they come from and how they get there.

3. Extending the vocabulary of taste

3.1. Word-making

English morphology easily permits the adjectivization of most common nouns, and almost nowhere is this possibility so exploited as in the language of perception, where so many "gaps" need to be filled. Lehrer (1984) notes that most of the words encountered in her study of wine descriptions follow an N + suffix pattern. This phenomenon opens nearly infinite possibilities for the expansion of taste vocabulary in English: the principle of compositionality allows us to not

only to refer to taste using words from non-taste domains, but also permits us to create and grasp the meanings of novel words, like "*tater-liscious.*"

In many cases, adjectives created to describe tastes will quite simply liken one taste to that of another food by the construction "*food*+y," where *y* is the adjectivizing suffix. It is a clearly versatile and ubiquitous construction. Since, as we know, these constructions are meant to fill gaps in our descriptive taste lexicon, we see that they are employed mostly in contexts where a food which is not a prototypical or focal token of a certain flavor is described in relation to another food, whose characteristic properties are captured and attributed to the flavor of the less exemplary item ("*meaty* mushroom," "*citrusy* oil," "*nutty* tofu" all appear in the review of one meal). Alternatively, we see these constructions used frequently in circumstances that seek to describe cases in which a food tastes somehow uncharacteristic ("*fishy* onions," "*beefy* spinach"), or in some cases tastes undesirably or unexpectedly "like itself" ([too] *garlicky* [garlic bread]).

Descriptions of the same construction need not take some kind of food as their base noun. They may liken foods to a variety of objects, referring to some fundamental property via semantic extension (*rubbery* vegetables, etc. - see below). Lehrer (1975: 24) notes from her studies of wine descriptions the employment of even more suffixes such as *–like, -full, -ic, -ish,* all of which may give any nominal entity adjectival status.

English is quite unique in this sense, in that for most other languages, this formulation is not lexical. Kuipers (1984) notes that Weyewa utilizes similistic sentence constructions to describe food more than basic terms themselves, but that this is always done as it is in most non-English languages, through a sentence of the form "x has the taste of y." Adjectivization is a

characteristic unique to formal constructions in English, though we still see that analogical comparisons are a nevertheless a norm in natural language taste descriptions.

3.2 Synaesthetic metaphor

Metaphorical extension allows speakers to borrow taste descriptions come from all kinds of lexical fields. As mentioned, the vocabulary of the taste domain frequently borrows from the neighboring domains of smell, touch, etc. English adjectives like *herby* or *sharp* respectively are meant to describe olfactory and tactile phenomena, but are imported into the taste vocabulary. Synaesthetic metaphors are the vehicle by which the meanings of non-taste sensory descriptions are projected to the description of taste, and these occupy a lion's share of the metaphorical extensions found in the English corpora of taste words. The metaphor is defined as synaesthetic if and only if its source domain is another perception term. We are here referring to "strongly" synaesthetic metaphors, whose both source *and* target domains are perception. Williams (1976) proposes the system that seems to regulate synaesthetic metaphor use. The pattern is only meant to predict its use in English, but has been referenced as a good generalization of the same phenomena in other languages as well (Backhouse 27). The pattern according to Williams is outlined in i.-vi.

> i, If a touch word transfers, it may transfer to tastes (sharp tastes), to color (dull color) or to sounds (soft)
>
> ii. Taste words do not transfer back to tactile experience or forward to dimension or color, only to smell (sour) or sound (dulcet)
>
> iii. there are no primary olfactory words that shift to other senses
>
> iv. dimension lexemes transfer to color (flat) or to sound (deep). *Thin* and *flat* are exceptions that can transfer to taste.
>
> v. color words can shift only to sound (loud)

vi. sound words may shift only to color (quiet)

This sketch is a more or less adequate account of how other, non-taste, sense words become taste words by way of metaphor. Rule (i) predicts collocations like *sharp cheese, soft melody* and *dull blue*. Rule (ii) predicts taste words like *sour note* or *sweet* [smelling] *candle,* describing smells and sounds, while predicting the ill-formedness of # *sweet corner/edge/blade*. (iii) Suggests that no words used to describe smell can describe other senses. (iv) Accounts for collocations like *flat color* and *deep sound. Thin* and *flat* are two particular dimension words also transfer to taste, as in the examples *flat soda* and *thin crust,* and Williams suggests that they are the only two capable of doing so. The use of the dimension lexeme *thin*, especially when discussing food and not beverage, may well imply reference directly to dimension itself, ("that pizza's crust is, literally, thin"). Finally, (v) and (vi) explain why a piece of music can be described as *quiet* and a t-shirt as *loud,* and vice-versa.

There are already a couple of challenges we can make to the system as proposed by Williams, a number of which come just by looking at common descriptions of many foods and wines. Principle (iii) is subject to the most obvious challenge. Whether or not we know what they mean, industry relies on multiple taste descriptions that come from olfactory domains. The label of a particular beef jerky product describes its contents as having a "*rich, smoky flavor*," *smoky* being a smell descriptor, here extended into the domain of taste. This type of descriptive overlap around the gustatory-olfactory distinction is a common one, but more frequently than not we understand that it is a smell (as opposed to a taste) that we are describing.

Principle (iv) is frequently contradicted by descriptions of wine. *Big*, *deep*, and *shallow* are three adjectives which are fundamental to the description of wine by most expert reviewers (Lehrer

1983: 5). While in wine descriptions these terms refer specifically to the "body" of a particular beverage, they occur frequently in food descriptions to refer to intensity of a taste:

> "Cascabel pepper adds rich, *deep* flavor to Mexican mole."

One particularly interesting thought which doesn't seem to have been looked at in much detail, is the extent to which tastes can be described according to the "sounds they make." Williams' proposal certainly rules it out, however a quick look at some franchise restaurant menus reveals that many English food descriptions rely heavily on a kind of oblique onomatopoeia. There is an ambiguity of reference in quirky English constructions such as "*zingy* buffalo wings," or "*sizzling* fajita sauce," insomuch as that these menu descriptions are indeed meant to describe how the foods taste, yet do so by evoking a sound attached to the food, either before or after it is ingested. What sensation these adjectives are meant to target can remain unclear, yet we still recognize that sound can to some degree factor into a gustatory experience, just as olfaction does[2]. We know that taste descriptions like *crispy, crunchy and squishy* directly evoke the textures of food, and the sounds associated with them. Looking beyond, should we assume that the description "five-alarm" chili refers to a sound the chili itself makes? Most would agree that the description "five-alarm" says something about how spicy the chili is. Semanticists interested in language development would certainly enjoy if sound-to-taste metaphors could be mapped uniformly in English menu language.

[2] Sound relates consequentially to our perception of taste. A consumer research study by Yorkston and Menon (2004) demonstrates that significant associations can be drawn between the phonemic characteristics of brand names with the tastes of products themselves: subjects are asked to select from within a set of possible ice cream brand names that which they most associate with "rich, smooth and creamy," and agree upon (invented) names that "sound better-tasting."

This brand of metaphors accounts for a great deal of taste words that come imported via semantic extension. These alone do not, however, appreciate all the semantic extensions we encounter in any given food review. The flavors in a Chinese dish are described as *fickle, tricky* and *fierce,* and a wine magazine's headline speaks of "Argentina's *muscular* Malbecs."

3.3 Conceptual metaphor

Words extended from other (non-sensory) domains are just as frequently encountered in metaphors used to describe cuisine, and reveal many more interesting things about the way we think and discuss food. The topic is of special interest when considering that the exact *converse* of the principle has been discussed in far more detail: authors have devoted plenty of attention to explaining why we use food words when we talk about all kinds of other things (it goes without saying that people can be "sweet" or "bitter," and that we call our loved ones "honey"). Things that are perceived through other ("higher-order") senses *come back* to taste when we describe them metaphorically (we *devour* books, and paintings leave *sweet* tastes in our mouths). What could possibly be happening in cases when, in order to say something about *food,* we describe it the way would describe *people?* More recent work by Lehrer (2007) regarding wine description demonstrates the use of more and more metaphors which hail from the domains of personality (*brilliant, brooding, pensive, recalcitrant)* physicality (*muscular, beefy, hulking*), as well as the domain of artifact or craft production (*crafted, polished, tight-woven*). These metaphors are suggestive on one hand because they come from domains that appear quite distant from taste, and second because, in many cases, they cannot be explained the way we traditionally explain

their converses (in which food or taste is a metaphor for something else). We will look first to a more clear definition of metaphor.

General theories of literary metaphor (Richards 1936) or conceptual metaphor in cognitive linguistics (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) define these metaphor as the mapping of characteristics from a source domain [SOURCE] (archaically *tenor*), onto a target entity [TARGET] (archaically *ground*). Here, *personality*, *physicality* etc. becomes the source by which one describes certain aspects of a target entity, which in this case is a particular aspect (or overall quality) of wine- *alcohol content*, *scent, caliber*, etc. Theorists such as Lakoff and Johnson have demonstrated extensively how such a principle comes to define important aspects of our linguistic relationship with the everyday world: we tend to conceptualize abstract entities by associating them metaphorically with other entities which are familiar in the real world. By this token, ineffable ideas such as *love* are conceptualized as more familiar things such as *journeys*, and so on. This in principle helps explain how we may bypass the difficulty of describing taste by reaching into other domains- but is the theory applicable here?

Andersen (2005), though in no great detail, discusses that such description of food happens for reasons *not* consistent with the paradigm of Lakoff and Johnson. He does not believe that humans "routinely think via metaphor," and believes the term "metaphor" itself should be reserved for its "original meaning: a striking comparison between two dissimilar things which can be seen, with the eye of the poet, as having something in common" (2005: 122). In this model, classification itself encodes all our human understanding; extension in metaphoric description only then makes things "more mysterious." This criticism itself must be both true and false. Lakoff and Johnson's model, for one, claims that conceptual metaphor is mediated by

thought, particularly schemas of images connected to our experiences in the world: borrowing from certain domains may lead to equally nebulous metaphors. Secondly, it is presupposed that the "metaphors we live by" are not metaphors that "anybody" lives by, but that are shared on very large human scales. When looking at how certain foods are described, we notice that making sense of a gustatory perception is not done uniformly, and often requires information from source domains which are themselves hard to grasp. On the other hand, a theory of conceptual metaphor offers an elegant explanation as to how semantic extension can solidify descriptions surrounding mostly ineffable perceptions: though they can be mystifying, they nevertheless have some power to *clarify*.

3.4 Explaining these phenomena

We come closer to resolving the use of metaphor when we more seriously we consider *why* and in which contexts we utilize them. What makes us use words like *shy* to describe a steak's marinade, when we can use words like *bland* which are found closer to the domain of taste? When describing taste metaphorically, why do we select words from one semantic field over another? More importantly, how do we agree on what these descriptions mean when we hear and use them? In the sense that most people could not give an adequate prose definition of "bland," should we imagine speakers to have an easier time when they are asked to explain what makes a food or drink taste "*shy*"? We have answered one part of this by demonstrating the simple fact that when we put tastes into words, we are mostly starting from scratch. Further considerations will help better clarify the issue. The first consideration is that

humans respond to tastes on *emotional* levels, and that our conceptions of taste are very much connected to the emotions they evoke.[3] The second consideration asks us to recognize that humans consume food as groups: taste descriptions are subject to the values that we [literally] bring to the table when we approach food. A third factor should take into account that taste description is in most all circumstances *pragmatic:* we interpret and formulate descriptions of food that are meant to share knowledge, *do things*, and make others do things in relation to food.

4. Pragmatics in taste description

4.1 Metalinguistic pragmatics

It helps to consider the later concept, the pragmatic description of taste, as consisting of two categories. The first can be classified as *metalinguistic*: it refers to the patterns in taste description that are pragmatically concerned (on an *active* level) with actually filling the linguistic gaps we have been discussing up until now. The most recognizable form of meta-linguistic taste description is that of taste science itself, which we have seen is not commensurable to descriptive analyses of taste terminology. Linguistically generalizing the human taste perception is possible to a certain degree, but ultimately fails on account of what people are used to eating, and how difficult tastes themselves are to identify inside cuisine.

It is in this same group of metalinguistic frameworks that we find the most predictability in the use of aforementioned metaphors that describe taste, mostly because such descriptions are

[3] Rozin (1990) demonstrates this in experimental psychology, as do countless other authors in philosophy and other disciplines.

formulated prescriptively among a specific group of speakers. The "wine-talk" studied by Leherer (1979, 1983, 1984, 2007) reflects a linguistic paradigm that applies almost exclusively to wine *experts*. The gustatory and olfactory properties of wine are part and parcel to this profession; thus wine tasters require terminology which is agreed upon when discussing qualities they seek to discern. We have seen that English wine terminology implements metaphors from specific, non-taste source domains to describe nuanced wine attributes: though any English speaker may be able to interpret the differing entailments of *fragile* and *tight-woven,* we know that non-experts do not interpret or command such metaphors as they are within the strict domain of wine tasting (Lehrer 1984). This suggests that such formulations, which are crucial tools for a wine taster, are at least somewhat arbitrary: it should not be suggested that experts can only "understand" wine by thinking about it *in terms of* a personality, corporal physique, or artisanal handicraft. In the sense that these terms are themselves *metaphoric,* evocative and non-discrete, wine talk can be viewed as a controlled system that reflects the more variable reality of natural language.

A third realm that formulates taste description on a metalinguistic level is industrial. At the intersection of food science and consumer research lays an extremely directed program of inquiry, whose sole purpose is to "adequately" describe taste. The nature of this research only further complicates understanding just where our linguistic judgments about taste come from: taste scientists in the food industry must take a given product and develop a lexicon that appropriately describes it. An interesting consequence of this research is that it provides a rough account of flavor semantics: we can see in them how taste terms are meaningful only in virtue of their extralinguistic collocations- taste terms have meaning with respect to the entities (food

products) they describe. At the same time, these "flavor lexicons" are not altogether descriptive: they are composed partly of judgments by speakers of a natural language, but are further mediated by experts' descriptions, which are based on chemistry and prescribed by taste science proper (Drake and Civille 2003). The descriptions of flavor according to which we decide what food to buy can in no way correspond to any one individual's subjective concept of that flavor, nor can it correspond to a nonexistent, objective idealization of that flavor (this is mostly relevant to artificially flavored items). In this sense, we can see the extent to which the way we associate flavors with flavor descriptions is partly at the mercy of industry. What is more difficult to determine is *how* influential the taste descriptions formulated by industry are on the descriptions that are used in everyday speech- as much as industry reflects natural language, so too must consumers be "adhering" to that which is "proposed" by the labels they read.

At this point we should remind ourselves that this paradox does not arise out of any particularly malicious intent on the part of industry; it speaks to the difficulty of their pragmatic task at hand: food producers are held to quality standards that include the lexicons they adopt. Nevertheless, we do not need to look far to witness another element of the taste lexicon, also developed by industry, which is suited to much more charged pragmatic ends. Advertising within the food industry exploits language's tendency to encode taste metaphorically, however with the more general goal of aesthetitizing food. Through these media we witness phenomena much more closely related to our own behavior in taste description, which have more obvious consequences when we look beyond English.

4.2 Aesthetic and descriptive pragmatics

i. In conversation

Sitting at a restaurant table, three acquaintances can be overheard as they contemplate a desert order. A piece of their discourse highlights how our descriptions of taste are pragmatic in context. As one speaker looks to the menu inquisitively, and another leans over to say "*The cheesecake here tastes heavenly.*" A third interjects to tell the first speaker that the cheesecake tastes "*...too creamy; the parfait is perfect, it tastes so, like, summery.*" The second and third speakers' claims are classic speech acts: the way saying "it's cold" can in the appropriate context mean "close the window," each food description seeks to suggest the decision maker "do something." Metaphorical taste terms *heavenly* and *summery* evoke hedonic reactions that speakers associate with taste: pleasure/sweetness, etc. The adjective does not define a taste specifically; it establishes a relevant frame of reference that describes the taste in context, but also charges it provocatively. In this sense, we see how a conceptual metaphor is both "clarifying" and "mystifying."

When looking beyond English, it becomes apparent that descriptive resources are utilized much differently in discourse contexts, be they massive or conversational. A Chinese speaker reflecting on how taste is described at the dinner table notes the following[4]: "...It's different in Chinese. At the table we share everything, and the food is what it is- we don't discuss it like it's a painting. When we eat something special like on holidays, people will talk about it different and tell stories about how different it is when they make it themselves... and what it reminds them of. The best Chinese meals have a dish for every kind of taste [...] so when people are excited about a good meal, it is because the dish has everything- they say 'it's sweet, and it's sour, and it's salty (!),' nothing like when you read a menu in a[n American] restaurant" (Tian Tian, 12 October 2008).

[4] Tian offered her linguistic judgments and personal reflections in an interview (October 2008). She is English-Chinese bilingual.

This testimony makes a preliminary contrast between patterns of Chinese and English conversation style. Its final claim, regarding restaurant menus, will be revisited in the next section. Based on the interview, we can look to differences in how taste is described conversationally in other languages as well- at least in a general, preliminary sense. For this, an ad hoc study of cross-linguistic conversations about food can provide important data, even if it does not generalize an entire linguistic community.

In a very informal survey of six bilingual and three English speaking Swarthmore College students, some interesting differences in taste descriptive judgments became apparent. Of the volunteers, three were native Arabic speakers (Palestine and Afghanistan), three were native Spanish speakers (Venezuela, Peru, Mexico), and three were native English speakers. All of students were interviewed independently on April 11th, 2009 in the school's cafeteria, and each earlier agreed to volunteer a list of adjectives they would use to describe a food's taste in their native language, as well as their best English translation of whatever descriptions they proposed. All participants described the taste of watermelon, which was chosen for its availability at that evening's dinner. Students were asked to write down descriptions that referred specifically to the watermelon's taste, and to "describe it as they were describing it to a fellow native speaker in conversation, and offer just words that first came to mind (no more than six)." The survey was not intended to secure an adequate account of "how watermelon tastes" in three languages, but to generalize whether the kinds of terms used varied with any predictability between the three, as the testimony of one speaker of Chinese and English speculated above. Something like it did in fact result.

Of the English speakers' judgments, the three terms that appeared most frequently were *watery, sweet,* and *refreshing*- one basic term, one adjectival noun derived from another (in this case component) substance, and a third- *refreshing*- that refers to a hedonic reaction related to taste. Most importantly is that English speakers demonstrated the most variability in their propositions: besides these three common terms, only two adjectives- *fresh* and *cool* were reported by more than one speaker. Beyond this, volunteers offered judgments that referred to a wide and sometimes incompatible range of taste sensations, which included no basic terms besides *sweet.* Some unique descriptions included *mealy, fruity, healthy, cold, waxy, tropical* and *reassuring.* Noting that one volunteer described the taste as *red,* it seemed apparent that the vast descriptive potential of English is not lost on its speakers: if volunteers indeed speak in conversation as they have reported, personal associations and instinctive emotional reactions as taste descriptions are all "fair game."

Interestingly, there was far more agreement between the three Spanish speaking volunteers. All three reported *refrescante* (refreshing), *dulce* (sweet), and *rica* (translated as "good," "good tasting" and "tasty") as a common description, making half of each speaker's report identical to the others. Further overlaps occurred, with at least two of the three speakers suggesting *suave* (translated as "light" and "mild"), *liviana* (light) and *buena* (good, very good) in common. Other terms included *madura* (ripe) and *divertida* (fun). These agreements point to a pattern in Spanish speakers' judgments that favor qualitative descriptions, which refer to a general *favorability* of the fruit and its qualities in a more explicit sense than the use of any adjective with a positive connotation. An important methodological flaw should be disclosed, which is that speakers likely

reserved descriptions that were longer than one lexical item, restricting them from otherwise very important comparative constructions of the form *sabe a*...("tastes like…").

The information gathered from native Arabic speakers provided incredibly revealing perspective on taste description. Not one informant could propose more than three or four adjectives they could imagine using in an everyday description. They were further hesitant to provide isolated adjectives to describe their taste of watermelon, which they say could easily be used but which they would not likely say in a discussion. Instead, they were provided and glossed a few important idiomatic expressions for tastes, specifically those of watermelon. Each speaker provided two terms for "sweet" – *tayyeb* and *helo/hilu* (these are the English orthographic spellings suggested by the participants). Besides this, each of the Palestinian speakers then claimed that there was only one other expression they would offer to describe a good-tasting watermelon in everyday conversation: *'asikkin*. Though they each proposed this description independently, the speakers collaborated to provide an adequate gloss. The term is literally a prepositional phrase that means "on the knife," but refers to a "perfect ripeness and consistency when you cut it, but also when you taste it- it means it's a good watermelon; it tastes perfect." The informants proposed that the term is the same one used when street vendors advertise melon for sale in their home villages: "on the knife means that you can cut it like butter." A third term, introduced by the last volunteer, was also striking. *Shalaby* describes fruit that is "fresh and ripe," but its meaning is literally "from the village or countryside." The informant notes that this term, too, is a common advertising pitch. They comment that "people where I am from don't trust things that come from the city; fruit from the villages is better."

For too many reasons to list, we cannot accept the above survey as an applicable standard to describe a linguistic population at large. It still gives us quite valuable anecdotes which reinforce the idea that different languages unique taste terms as well as shared ones, and that there is a scale of flexibility with respect to what terms can be used to describe a taste, with English emerging as more flexible than the others.

The above-cited interview relating to Chinese taste descriptions also fits into the sketch outlined by the English-Arabic-Spanish survey. This speaker claims (however anecdotally) that she is familiar with speakers describing food with basic taste terms used without very specific discrimination, and not a lot of variability beyond this. This can contrast clearly with the patterns we see clearly in English. Three Spanish speakers surveyed demonstrate a tendency to describe food with less variability, greater emphasis on the positive attributes of the watermelon itself, and above all their *liking* the food's taste. The terms proposed by Arabic language informants to describe their everyday conversational behavior are especially interesting in that their taste descriptions etymologically refer to acts which are not about *tasting*, and these descriptions are identical to those used in advertising contexts. These have especially relevant mappings to the English language we see used in persuasive contexts, which are addressed in more detail below.

ii. In restaurant menus

The final comment mentioned in the interview above expresses a contrast between patterns in conversational Chinese taste description and those of "American restaurant menus." This seeks to propose a kind of descriptive minimalism in Chinese, compared to a *less* conservative medium of American menus. The relevance of this claim has in fact already been demonstrated. In an article titled "America's national dish: the style of restaurant menus," Zwicky and Zwicky (1987)

discover ways in which American menu language goes well beyond the descriptive call of duty, and the taste terms we find within them. In these menus, we find captions to describe dishes that forego functional brevity for highly rhetorical structures. There we can find a description of a shrimp entrée, which proposes that "*zesty garlic butter brings out the best flavors of this epicurean treat.*"

The authors suggest a few reasons for the overabundance of "tasty adjectives" in such contexts. It is partly a matter of discourse register according to the authors, who comment that the "too much information" norm is a strategy meant to engage a restaurant-goer "in conversation." This standard thus becomes less apparent to the authors as they look to menus from higher-priced, higher-quality establishments. More terse descriptions of food perhaps assume a more refined understanding of cuisine on the part of these restaurants' customers.

If "America's national dish" is the restaurant menu itself, it suggests that our linguistic and cultural identity is defined by superfluous aesthetitization. This falls in contrast with the Chinese restaurant menu, which is a quintessentially functionalist text: these menus are structured as taste-ingredient "matrices," which list foods first according to type, then according to preparation modes which correspond to main flavor tropes in a standard Chinese meal (garlic/salty, sweet/sour, hot, etc).[5] The English discourse quoted in the previous section would be unlikely to occur in East Asia, for a few possible reasons: for one, the Chinese cultural standard is that eating (in restaurants or not) is communal and individuals do not make choices for themselves

5. This is based on a survey of 15 Chinese-English restaurant menus found online, which were reviewed with assistance from native speakers Michael Huang and Mark Lee, who contributed additional comments on the structure of restaurant menus and meals in China.

alone. Secondly, there is a conception of food in Chinese culture which is "reflexive," that is not realized in America: American food is influenced by any and all cuisines of the world (Lehrer 1990), and Chinese cuisine is, in general, Chinese. Informants in Chinese agreed that there is a hesitance to describe tastes "in terms" of what other things taste like in Chinese food, which could be construed as criticism. This could suggest that conceptions of taste are less strictly bound to prototypical standards in the US as they are in China: the notion of "what something tastes like" is distracted in sheer virtue of available variety.

The distinction we see between conversational and menu-based taste descriptions in two cultural settings can be pursued to much larger discursive contexts. In advertising, where rhetorical aesthetitization of taste is most pervasive, the observed contrasts are maintained to some degree. *How* industry persuades members of a given society to prefer a common food product is done through calculated uses of descriptive metaphors, which are tailored to its audience's culture. Even when these descriptions refer to similar-tasting items, acceptable and preferred terms vary between languages and cultures. Strauss (2005) studies differences between cross-cultural descriptions and depictions of food in their aesthetitized form- namely in the genre of advertising. The work defines the encountered differences in terms of the "dual notion of taste" both gustatory and aesthetic preferences: the taste of food is seen to be described according to the specific aesthetic interests of the audience. The study is nearly the only one of its kind, and its results are worth detailed review here.

In her general analysis of Japanese food descriptions, Strauss first finds a tendency that falls in obvious contrast with those in English and Korean language advertising. In Japanese food advertisements, there is an overwhelming use of the terms *umai* and *oishii,* which are

semantically generic descriptors that mean "delicious," or "good-tasting" (9). This opposes patterns in the US and Korea, where such terms are used much less frequently and usually only contexts of reassurance that are meant to "hyperbolize 'good taste'" against some threat of doubt (As when Bill Cosby says "This Jell-O pudding is *too good* to be fat free"). Unlike in Japan, US advertisements simply presuppose that the advertised food *is* already "good-tasting."

Strauss accounts for subsequent patterns in taste description, taking note of other important lexical phenomena we have already discussed, namely synaesthetic metaphor. Her corpus specifically refers to instances of tactile-gustatory synaesthetic metaphors, and the neighboring adjectives that reinforce these metaphors' descriptions of foods. The data reveal interesting patterns relating to how the tactile-gustatory experience is represented within each language, and trends in how the experience is aesthetitized from one to the next.

According to her analysis, uses of these metaphors in Japanese are noteworthy for their continued association with *oishii*, or "good taste." Describing the tactile taste qualities of food are achieved through adjectives such as *fluffy* and *puffy* (figure 1). Japanese ads favor depictions of soft texture that do not actually evoke the act of eating, and associate it visually with things like "clouds" and "babies." Examples which do refer to the mouth-feel experience do so with an emphasis on *dental* contact with food, such as the *popping* bite of a sausage (which employs an aural-tactile-gustatory metaphor, contrary to Williams' paradigm explained in section 2.2.2). Around all of these metaphors are the consistently prevalent *oishii* and *umai*, referring to "good tasting."

English ads, on the other hand, are based around synaesthetic metaphors such as *creamy, soft, ooey and gooey*, many of which Strauss notes are not tangible as taste adjectives in Japanese- we are reminded that Japanese construction for the adjective *creamy* would only refer to "made of cream" (figure 2). These terms are used alongside additional adjectives that aesthetisize taste through far more abstract evocations of pleasure, some of which we have already seen Here, descriptors such as *luscious* and *decadent* connect tactile-gustatory metaphors to foods in ways that do not specify any one aspect of taste, but instead evoke generalized sensual pleasure.

Korean advertisements contrast interestingly with both English and Japanese, in that they evoke descriptions which quite *specifically* highlight the specific tactile sensation suggested by synaesthetic metaphors (figure 3). These advertisements seem to call attention to the dynamic tactile-gustatory experience of eating a solid food. Adjectives meaning "chunky" and "crunchy" depict foods aa *"live"* entities within the Korean advertising context.

Figures 1-3: Tactile-Gustatory synaesthetic metaphors in three advertising corpora (Strauss 2005: 15-27).

Figure 1: Japan

yawarakaku 'soft', 'softly'	Supuun jirushi [sugar]
funwari 'fluffy'	Supuun jirushi [sugar]
fukura tamago 'puffy egg [dried]'	Noritama furikake [furikake]
oniku no hagotae 'the texture of meat'	Purima ham [ground beef]
hajikeru oishisa 'popping deliciousness'	Baierun sausage [sausage links]

Figure 2: United States

Sooo creamy you can spread it	Skippy Peanut Butter
Now tastes even richer and creamier	Country Crock [margarine]
A soft bread twist	Kentucky Fried Chicken
Tender chunks of KFC chicken	Kentucky Fried Chicken
ooey	Pillsbury Cinnamon Rolls
Gooey	Pillsbury Cinnamon Rolls
Pepperoni Pizza in a crisp crust.	Hot Pockets

Figure 3: Korea

Kenteki ga sala issnun khaley leytto 'chunky curry sauce (lit.'the chunks are alive')	[Ceyil Curry Sauce]
Kenteki ga sayng sayng hanikka 'the chunks are fresh (and lively)	[Ceyil Curry Sauce]

Strauss summarizes these analyses as follows:

> "Japanese food ads tend to prefer generic taste descriptors over more quality-specific ones, they tend to contain fewer instances of hyperbole and animated vocal exclamations in response to food/beverage sampling, and they tend to deliver more implicit messages with respect to reasons behind product quality. In contrast, Korean and U.S. ads tend to explicitly specify taste descriptors (though the patterns here are not completely parallel), and to employ hyperbole and emphatic exclamations in direct response to the tasting of the advertised products. And, finally, both Korean and U.S. ads associate the sensual pleasures of food with sensual pleasures of other types of behaviors" (1453).

A look at advertising thus demonstrates ways in which taste terms vary on cultural lines in one pragmatic genre. What Strauss does not account for is how the same genre is capable of setting discourse standards as much as reflecting those established within culture. Lakoff and Johnson (1987) have demonstrated the power of conceptual metaphors in mass scales, including politics and media. Advertising models are themselves based on representing any product as a marketable image, and in the case of food, taste. This places a great deal of power in the hands of the advertiser in relation to audiences. When we look to the evolution of advertising campaigns, we see that taste descriptions target values that societies idealize: describing the taste of a scotch whiskey with the metaphor *refined* both accounts for its taste and conceptually evokes high class, wealth and aesthetic discrimination. Fast food advertising has developed along with social trends to the point that *light* and *guilt-free* are as prevalent taste descriptions as *savory* and *satisfying*, on account of relatively new social concerns regarding public health. The t-shirt slogan that says

"Advertising helps me decide" is true on two levels: it allows us discriminate between that which does and does not appeal to our preferences, and provokes us with the prospect of becoming, or taking part in something that we value or aspire to.

The above considerations of aesthetitized taste descriptions in advertising leave us at a convenient juncture. The human taste sensation we have been discussing here becomes provocative on multiple intellectual levels. Descriptions of taste are connected on a fundamental level to our desires: the way we crave a salty snack, we can too crave "refinement" on a level that signifies far beyond the individual level. The values and goals that define our cultural and personal preferences, as Bordieau notes, "all come back to taste."

5. Conclusion

In the human sciences, there seems to be a trend in all the contemporary literature that discusses food, culture and society. Authors infallibly introduce their work with a reference to Brillat Savarin's famous quip: "tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are." The present discussion has treaded through relatively uncharted territory, in that it speaks to an important reformulation of Savarin's statement. We have obtained a general sense as to how we may instead think "tell me ***about*** what you eat and I will tell you who you are." With respect to taste and the lexicon, we have seen that it is in fact difficult to tell people *about* what we eat in a strict sense, and difficult to interpret and translate these descriptions across culinary and spoken languages. If there are linguistic universals to be found in perception taxonomies, it is acknowledged here as elsewhere that isolating them within the domain of taste is a serious challenge (Kuipers 1984). Nevertheless, where the complexity of taste eludes our perceptual

lexicon, human language compensates in ways that can be far more telling. Talking *about* what we eat requires the use of rich metaphorical extensions, all of which provide valuable insight as to how we think about food in relation to the world, or how our knowledge of the world helps us describe that which is ineffable. The emotional and social power of taste, coupled with our descriptive system, is meaningful in a commercialized world in which we are constantly being told "what we should eat." The consequent "tell me ***about what I should eat***" is yet another dimension by which the language of taste is subject to culturally relevant pragmatics, and where this discussion ends.

We have now traced the implications taste and taste description from its most personal to most global levels. Our conception of taste is built into us physiologically and cognitively- how we perceive the taste of food is built into our human bodies and minds. How we describe what we taste, however, is deeply rooted in the rest of the world around us: we think about tastes in terms of not only other foods, but a host of other sensations, emotions and experiences. We "internalize" the world around us through eating in the same the way we "internalize" everything we have ever seen, smelled, touched or heard. For whatever reason, humans simply do not think about how food tastes as seriously as they think about what something looks like, or what somebody is saying (except for those few individuals whose livelihoods are based on thinking and talking about food). For this, lexicons have not developed so as to account specifically for the taste experience; instead, we communicate information about taste in terms of "the rest" of our knowledge. Our taste language is in this sense an act of "externalizing" our thoughts, but these thoughts reflect all that which we have *already internalized.* The same way we

"*incorporate*" our experiences with memory, the descriptions of such experiences may be *incorporated* into another perceptive lexicon semantically.

As a matter of coincidence and for reasons we know are of interest, not everybody touches, sees, hears and smells all the same things in a lifetime, nor do all people *like* to touch, hear and smell the same things. For this, as we have demonstrated, the descriptions of taste across languages are alike in that all human beings have the same taste ability, and different in that not all human beings taste the same things, *like* to taste the same things, or think about taste *in terms* of the same extra-gustatory perceptions of the world. Examining how taste is discussed with more thorough consideration of cultural contexts becomes in this sense crucial to a more complete understanding not only of human beings, but the world we live in.

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