Preface

When I talk to my friends and colleagues about my research, they typically think that I am an expert taster and, as such, I can describe the taste of food stuffs with the most appropriate vocabulary. They assume that I know every aspect of flavour, and that I can effortlessly choose the most appropriate wine for dinner. Other people instead need clarification on the meaning of “taste”: following the academic and sociological tradition by Bourdieu, some people think that I deal with “social” taste – the set of cultural and aesthetic choices that an individual may make according to their preferences.

These topics, albeit fascinating, are only tangentially related to the core of this book. I am not interested in food description per se, nor in wine description. Furthermore, the discipline of interest is linguistics (not sociology), and to me, the confusion that arises in conversation between physical taste and social taste is a metaphor that enables us to understand an abstract concept such as personal preferences in terms of a more concrete concept such as the sense of taste. This book is about the words that describe taste, and their metaphorical and metonymic elaborations. Ultimately, this is a book about our capacity to create meaning out of physical perception and sensations. This often happens in a creative way, but perhaps even more often the words of taste follow predictable and nonarbitrary paths of meaning expansion.

One of the crucial assumptions in linguistic theories from Saussure onwards is the arbitrariness of meaning. Signs denote concepts, and the association between a sign and its meaning is thought to be arbitrary. According to his view, the sequence of sounds that constitutes the word crunchy is nothing more than a convention adopted by a community of speakers to describe a quality of food, and there is nothing in the word crunchy that resembles what it means. I want to emphasise that a century worth of linguistic investigation has shown that this is not always the case. Languages show some traces of iconicity (an icon is a type of sign that resembles its meaning), and crunchy is an example of this relationship between a sign and its meaning. Moreover, the extended meaning of concepts (i.e., the non-literal meaning) is motivated by the architecture of our brains and the nature of our bodies. The words that an individual utters daily are not (totally) arbitrary: rather, today general consensus in Cognitive Linguistics maintains that linguistic choices are constrained and dictated by a number of factors. Some of these might be external to language, such as frequency of use, entrenchment, attention, cultural factors, and perceptual qualities, to name but a few. The words we utter have come down to us through centuries of nonarbitrary dynamic patterns of sense relations.
Cognitive Linguistics is the branch of linguistic studies that integrates different approaches to language description and recognises the role of external factors on language production, recognition, and use. Scholars in this tradition have largely investigated the lexicon and semantic processes of meaning-making. For instance, a fruitful area of investigation in Cognitive Linguistics (and anthropology) is colour and vision studies. The cross-cultural investigation of the spectrum of colour and visual perception partitioning has inspired many researchers and has led to the formulation of a theory of categorisation that is still valid and continually supported by empirical data. According to this theory, a representative concept of a category occupies a central spot (i.e., a prototype), while other members are distributed around the prototype in a radial network. As a result, the different reds that a person may experience are judged against a prototype of redness, instantiated by a central and prototypical concept of RED, which arises from the combination of everyday experiences and language use.

Unfortunately, the sense of taste has not been given the same scientific attention as vision. There are only scattered and incomplete accounts about the words of taste used by different cultures and languages around the world. These contributions are dated (they date back to the early years of the 20th century), and the methodology with which data have been collected is often inconsistent and doubtful. Following this, taste had been forgotten for years, and no solid investigation solely dedicated to this sense has been published until (1994) when Backhouse published his book on the “lexical field of taste in Japanese”. Information on the words of taste in Indo-European languages and in English is however scattered in several papers working with different foci of attention and in different traditions. The major impetus towards a reconsideration of the lexicon of the senses has arisen mainly within Cognitive Linguistics, as a consequence of the centrality of the theory of embodiment. According to this theoretical stance, our mental processes (including language) are motivated by the information obtained through our bodies.

Why would taste be less represented in linguistic studies than other senses? The reasons for this disparagement are manifold. Hints of this scientific and intellectual neglect may be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy, where philosophers in the Socratic school partitioned the senses in different categories and considered taste to be in one of the lowest positions. A meager consideration of the bodily sensations associated with taste and smell has crossed the centuries and academic investigations until recently and has been reinforced by

1 In the book I use SMALL CAPS when referring to conceptual domains in keeping with the typographical conventions of Cognitive Linguistics literature.
the observation that the lexical items to describe taste and smell are less numerous than those that describe other perception modalities. Nonetheless, recent data in cross-linguistic literature show that this is not true for every language, and that comparing different systems of conceptualisation of perception may help us better understand our bodies, our minds, and our cultures.

Culture plays a crucial role in the conceptualisation of perception. On one hand, cultural practices license or block specific linguistic realisations: despite its embodied and biological basis, the lexicon of perception varies among different linguistic systems. On the other hand, the meaning of this lexicon is elaborated in different manners across cultures, and it mirrors specific practices. In the case of English, the language under scrutiny in this book, this elaboration has been brought about over centuries through literature and usage, and over a considerable geographical area of diffusion. This boils down to thousands of generations of individuals using English to communicate and exchange information, resulting in wide linguistic variation and semantic change. This terrific wealth of information has been stored in linguistic units and described by lexicographers in dictionaries encompassing the possible meanings and realisations. Furthermore, English boasts one of the largest corpora available for a researcher to test hypotheses and verify usage. This represents a valuable tool for the investigation and description of linguistic phenomena in linguistic research, especially for researchers working within the descriptive approach sponsored by the Cognitive Linguistics tradition.

Three books have been sitting on my desk while working on the final revision of this book: Sensory linguistics (2019a), by Bodo Winter; Perception metaphors (2019), edited by Laura Speed, Carolyn O’Meara, Lila San Roque and Asifa Majid, and my Ph.D. dissertation. Sensory linguistics represents the first attempt to unify several strands of research working on the interface between perception, cognition, and language, and sets a theoretical and methodological standard for linguists interested in this area of research. Perception metaphors collects contributions on the elaboration of perception language, thus exploring the range of possibilities of human meaning creation. Lastly, Tastes We Live By represents an improved version of my Ph.D. dissertation. This was mainly written in Perugia, Italy, but it largely benefitted from a period that I spent at the University of Glasgow. There, I became acquainted with the Mapping Metaphor with the Historical Thesaurus Project, a monumental effort to map the role of metaphor throughout the history of English. Furthermore, many other inputs and insights came from the conferences I have attended, and the fruitful debates that followed. This book adopts various methodologies, sometimes borrowed from neighbouring disciplines, in order to account for the linguistic elaboration of taste in English and its representation. The interdisciplinarity of this approach mirrors the interdisciplinary approach of Cognitive Linguistics. It integrates multiple
perspectives and tools with the aim of exploring the representation of taste in English: philosophy, evolutionary anthropology, psychology, psycholinguistics, biology, cultural anthropology, corpus analysis, and lexicographic analysis contribute to the identification of the words of taste, and to how and why we use these words to communicate.

This book represents in many ways the sum of years of research dedicated to the topic of the language of perception and taste more specifically. It is primarily addressed to scholars in linguistics, as well as in cognitive science and psycholinguistics. Furthermore, scholars in disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and even advertisement and food sciences may find it beneficial. The variety of approaches and the array of linguistic phenomena described should be of interest across a diverse audience. As such, it provides a brief introduction to central topics in Cognitive Linguistics, and it discusses at length only the core theoretical concepts that are applied to the description of taste. The interested reader is able to find references to further their understanding of the subject, while the expert reader may benefit from detailed exposition of specific topics. Information coming from other disciplines integrates the discussion to give an exhaustive account of the conceptualisation of taste.

The contributions of this book to the scientific debate are manifold. Firstly, it fills a gap in scientific literature about the language of taste in English, thus representing a first attempt towards the description of the role of this sensory modality in the creation of meaning through language. Secondly, it showcases the application of methods and tools that are only tangentially adopted in Cognitive Linguistics, such as the Cognitive Salience Index and Sorting tasks. The choice of these methodologies, involving native speakers either directly or indirectly, were dictated and influenced by my identity as an outsider to the language I am describing. I am not a native speaker of English, and I learned the language through schooling and many years spent living in the countries and working with people whose native language is English. The approach of the outsider enabled me to have an external eye, since my intention in writing this book is that of an ethnologist who decides to describe a culture to which they don’t belong. As opposed to representing a drawback for my investigation, this has given me the opportunity to verify my intuitions through dictionaries and corpora, which is also in keeping with the Cognitive Linguistics approach. To complete the picture, this book also adopts standard methodologies such as corpus and lexicographic analysis. Again, both methods allow for a usage-based description of language. Particularly, the lexicographic analysis with the data of the Mapping Metaphor Project presents a methodology for the diachronic investigation of semantic change in the English language of perception. This perspective has been sporadically investigated in previous literature, and it offers a promising
area of analysis. The rich and well-documented history of English offers a great opportunity for tracing the lexical and semantic development of perceptual language. The linguistic phenomena explored in this book are located at the intersection of language, culture, cognition, and perception, thus posing questions on the nature of our minds and the constraints operated by our bodies on our conceptual organisation. The data discussed in the following pages are restricted to English gustatory words, and therefore are specific to this linguistic system. These data may however be further elaborated and compared with (hopefully) homologous data coming from other languages, to gain a better and more general idea of the role of taste in human cognition. Moreover, the empirical data and their theoretical interpretations contribute to the current debate in sensory linguistics on the nature and the internal structure of the lexicon of the senses. The usage of gustatory lexical items to describe other sensory domains, and the motivation that underlies these linguistic realisations both confirm and partially question recent theoretical proposals on the conceptual organisation of the lexicon of the senses.

As I stated, the main objective of the research reported in this book is a description of the lexical domain of taste in English. In the lexical semantics tradition, there are two main approaches to the description of meaning: onomasiology and semasiology.\(^2\) The onomasiological perspective is concerned with the elicitation of all the different lexical items that may be used to refer to the same concept. This approach structures the first section of the book, which answers the question “what are the words of taste in English?”. Whereas a semasiological approach investigates the different meanings associated to the same lexical item, dealt with in the second section of the book, which answers the question “what are the conceptual mechanisms that drive the figurative usage of taste words?”.

The physical experience of taste starts in the womb, and gustatory stimuli accompany us in our daily lives. Our physiological responses to specific tastes are shared with other members in the order of Primates, thus testifying to its biological origins. Information coming from this sense guides our dietary preferences and behavioural responses daily, yet our linguistic understanding of this sense is still fragmentary. Considering the scientific scenario in which this book is nestled, and the research questions that shape the enquiry, we may start our journey into the discovery of the tastes we live by.

\(^2\) The distinction between onomasiology and semasiology is most commonly used in continental, European lexicology, less so in the Anglo-Saxon tradition (Geeraerts 2000: 82; Groendelaers, Speelman, and Geeraerts 2007: 988). Nonetheless, it is useful to illustrate the double scope of this book.