



HAL
open science

Eating verbs in French and German: how do French and German express the relationship to food?

Sylvain Farge

► **To cite this version:**

Sylvain Farge. Eating verbs in French and German: how do French and German express the relationship to food?. First International Workshop on linguistic approaches to Food and Wine Description, Margarita Goded Rambaud; Alfredo Poves Luelmo, May 2009, Madrid, France. hal-01917340

HAL Id: hal-01917340

<https://hal.science/hal-01917340>

Submitted on 9 Nov 2018

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Sylvain FARGE, University of Lyon, CRTT (Centre de Recherche en Terminologie et Traduction)

Eating verbs in French and German: how do French and German express the relationship to food?

As shown in previous papers (Farge, Depierre, 2008; Farge, 2007) the notion of taste is different in French, German and English. What seems to be a mere objective physiological sense is actually deeply influenced by language and culture. On the basis of these first insights, we shall analyse in this contribution the verbs of eating in French and German in order to determine whether the results obtained so far are confirmed. This will be an occasion to question the heuristic value of linguistic conclusions in the field of taste and food.

After giving a first overview of former researches, we will focus on the two main verbs of eating in French and German, *manger/ bouffer* and *essen/ fressen*. We will then analyse the eating verbs of both languages. By doing this, an attempt will be done at understanding how much language can reveal about the conception of eating in a given culture.

Concerning taste, papers basing on lexicographic data and morphological and semantic analyses, the authors showed great differences between German, English and French in the linguistic conceptualisation of taste. As a matter of fact, the conception of taste may be linked tight to the perception of eating.

According to the view of former papers about the analysis of the substantives *taste*, *Geschmack* and *goût*, the conception of taste is different in the three languages. As to our concern, in German, taste is what a subject experiences when tasting something: taste is a mutual experience associating a taster and a tastant, it is seen as a live process. In French, taste is first of all the quality of an object, inherent to this object, and the faculty of a subject to recognize this quality by the sense of taste. In other words, taste is in French an objective property of an object, it exists as a reality in the world, just as the sense of taste with which this property is felt. In German, taste does neither exist as a sense independently of an object it applies to, nor as a property of an object independently of a subject experiencing it.

Assuming that, we could suppose that the conception of eating shall be consistent with this conception of taste. As already shown by Farge, French displays verbs like *savourer* or *déguster*, formed on *saveur* (*flavour*) or *goût* (*taste*). They, principally *savourer*, refer to the fact of appreciating the really specific taste of something. This verb has no exact translation in German. Eventually, this verb supposes that taste, to be “savouré”, exists as a proper object

of the world. On the contrary, the verb *schmecken* (to taste) is reversible in German, which means that it can refer to the fact, for a subject, of tasting something, or, for a food, of tasting of something. In French, the first is designated by the verb *goûter*, the second by the expression *avoir un goût* (to have a taste). Do the verbs of eating fit in this lexical frame? To answer this question, we shall firstly analyse the difference between *essen* and *fressen* in German and *manger* and *bouffer* in French.

At first sight, *essen* and *manger* can be considered as the standard forms to express the process of eating, *fressen* and *bouffer* representing the slang version of the corresponding verb. However, a neater analysis will deliver more accurate information.

In German, *essen* is used in only two expressions referring to the social act of eating food (*es wird nichts so heiß gegessen wie es gekocht wird*, nothing is as tragic as it may seem at first sight, *selber essen macht dick*, eating alone makes fat). *Fressen*, which refers to the act of feeding, is much more used to express a notion of destruction or greedy consumption, like in *sich auffressen lassen* (to get destroyed by something or somebody). Actually, this idea of destruction is also present in the verb *verzehren* (to eat up, to consume). More generally, *fressen* appears in other expressions, like *etwas gefressen haben* (to have understood something): the salient aspect is the idea of incorporation.

On *essen* are built different substantives, all referring to eating as a social act under the perspective of the act or of its circumstances: *Ein Geschäftsessen* (a business meal), *das Mittagessen* (the lunch), *die Essgabel* (the fork)... The word *das Essen* can denote the fact of eating as well as what is eaten as far as it has been prepared (food). As a contrary, *fressen* is present in substantives referring to the snout (*die Fresse*), to a bad meal (*der Fraß, das Fressen*), or to simple meals without much preparation (*der Fresskorb, the picnic hamper, die Fresserei, gluttony, the nosh up, der Fressnapf, the feeding bowl*). The difference between *fressen* and *essen* therefore holds in the difference between eating as a social act of incorporating prepared food (*essen*) and eating as a destruction of (unprepared) food (*fressen*) or anything which was not prepared to be eaten. As both is seen as quite different, *fressen* and *essen* commutate in the rarest expressions, mainly when physical eating is meant. This difference between eating prepared food and destroying unprepared food, which partly overlaps with the difference human/ animal, is rendered by the paradigms of social eating and incorporation. As a confirmation, another couple of verbs renders this difference: *speisen* (high standard)/ *futtern* (vulgar), which are formed on *Speise* (prepared, cooked food, for example in the restaurant) and *futter* (fodder).

In French, up to a few ones, all occurrences of *bouffer* and *manger* can commute, the difference is rather settled by the linguistic standard. For example, *manger* can be used for an animal as well as for a human being, unlike German, where *fressen* is applied to animals (because they eat unprepared food) and *essen* to human beings. *Bouffer* is almost the same as *manger* in a vulgar form. You can hence say: *avoir mangé/ bouffé du lion* (*to have eaten lion, to be energetic*), *manger/ bouffer tout son argent* (*to waste one's money*)... In a few cases, only *manger* or *bouffer* are allowed. For example, a car can be said to *bouffer de l'essence* (*to consume plenty of fuel*); anyway, *boire/ téter de l'essence* (*to drink/ suck fuel*) is possible: in fact, *manger* supposes a solid food or soup, any prepared food you eat with cutlery. In the expression *manger ses mots* (*to eat one's words, to mumble*) words are not eaten, not even metaphorically, they just do not come out of the mouth. As there is no ingestion, *bouffer* is not possible. In another expression, *il y a à boire et à manger* (about art, for example: *there are good and bad aspects at the same time*), only *manger* is allowed, precisely because of the contrast to *boire*. Actually, *bouffer* rather insists on greediness and bad manners, on the mere destruction, incorporation of food, *manger* rather on the social act of eating. In both languages, a different paradigm is drawn for the first to express the act of eating: *consuming prepared food vs incorporating unprepared or bad food* in German, *consuming food according to good manners vs incorporating and destroying food untidily* in French.

Other verbs refer in both languages to eating processes. The question which arises is whether they form paradigms consistent with the results above. In the following text, we shall focus on verbs used to explain human eating and squeeze verbs of feeding. In German, *schlemmen* or *schwelgen* express the idea of eating with pleasure but also in great quantities, whereas *schlingen* only refers to the quantity and velocity of the eating act, *naschen* or *schlecken* refer to the fact of eating almost sweet food with great pleasure (*süß, sweet*, means in German also *neat, nice, lovely, sugar* is really appreciated in Germanic cooking). The idea of quantity is also present in *spachteln* (from *Spachtel, spatula*). In *löffeln, gabeln* or *tafeln* (from *Löffel, spoon, Gabel, fork* and *Tafel, table*), the eating is seen through the tools which are used to eat, what is coherent with the importance of the distinction prepared/ unprepared food. When the mouth is alluded to in the verb, it refers to the animal and can be rather despictive (*fressen*) or pleasant, humourous (*schnabulieren*, from *Schnabel, beak*). In the first case, the radical *fress-* refers to the snout of mammals. The beak refers to birds, which display no real similarity to humans, so that the beak can be seen as an instrument just as a fork or spoon. The metaphor is thus beautifying. The other verbs are built either with the

preverb *ver-*, which induces a destruction (*verputzen*, to scoff, *verschlingen*, to gobble, *verzehren*, to consume) or with other preverbs or metaphors which indicate that food is filled up into the stomach, as in *stopfen* (to cram), *sich etwas einverleiben* (to incorporate something), *einnehmen* (to have an intake), *herunterbringen* (to pull down), *herunterwürgen* (to choke down), *reinhauen* (to tuck in). Thus, in both last categories, the idea of consuming food, of pulling it down and consuming it, rejoins the notion of destruction and ingestion we have already found in *fressen* as antonymic verb to *essen*. Undeniably, the presence of preverbs capable of expressing destruction or movement in space in German can explain the richness of this categories, the variety of verbs expressing the consumption of food as destruction or swallowing down. This does not explicitly mean that these notions, these conceptions of eating are deeply cultural and representative for the Germanic cultures. It may be, altogether, that this linguistic specificity plays a role in the cultural construction of the eating act. As a matter of fact, we shall see that French, whose morphology is not as precise about this notions, still displays a large number of verbs expressing the same idea of filling up, just with other morphologic means.

In French, verbs of eating are numerous and often distinguish themselves by the language standard they belong to. Synonymic with *manger* are for instance *boulotter* (slang) or *se sustenter* (high standard) or else *becqueter* (familiar, built on *bec*, *beak*, cf. *schnabulieren* in German) or *gueuletonner* (vulgar, built on *gueule*, *snout*, cf. *fressen* in German). As already mentioned, French has at its disposal the verbs *savourer* or *déguster*, which express the fact of appreciating the specific flavour of a food. They can only partially be translated in *genießen* or *auskosten*, *verkosten*, which express different notions. In fact, in German, taste is conceived as an individual experience, which cannot be communicated as something objective. Instead, in French, it is seen as an intrinsic property of a food and the intrinsic faculty of a subject to pick it up. From a linguistic point of view, it is therefore legitimate to expect that French eating verbs refer to eating as a social act, about which discussions can be held. This social dimension by French speaking people and more broadly in latin cultures has been put into evidence by sociologists (Fischler, and Masson, 2007), who speak about *commensalism* (*commensalisme*). Interestingly, French displays verbs referring to the special social and temporal circumstances of the meal, like *déjeuner* (to breakfast or have lunch), *dîner* (to dine in the evening, principally with guests) or *souper* (quite seldom, to dine in the evening, without guests) or still *goûter* (to have a snack, usually around four o'clock). *Dinieren* or *soupiieren* exist in German, but they are formal and as such not commonly used.

Otherwise, to express the fact of eating lunch or dinner supposes to explicitly mention the daytime: *zu Mittag/ Abend essen/ mittagessen/ abendessen*. This corresponds to the fact, already highlighted by sociologists that the temporal frame of the meals is more important for French than for German. and endowed with a broader social signification. Two other verbs express the idea of eating much by festive circumstances, *banqueter* (from *banquet, banquet*) or *festoyer* (from *fête, party, fest*). Till against the beginning of the past century, much more verbs existed to express this notion of festive meal bringing large companies together (*riboiter, ripailler, bombancer, bomber, bringuer, godailler...*). The broad reduction of their use suggests a mutation in the eating customs. In German, the equivalent to *banqueter* would be *schmausen*, but its use has become seldom and it is practically exclusively used in an ironical way. As in German, much verbs express in French the fact of filling up one's stomach, as, for example, *s'en mettre plein la panse/ la lampe/ le cornet (to fill one's stomach), se farcir quelque chose (to fill oneself with something), se gaver (to scoff), se bourrer (to cram)*... As in German, too, these verbs are colloquial till vulgar, as the physiological aspect of eating is socially rather ruled out.

In French, eating is conceived as the fact of appreciating the intrinsic taste of food. According to this, it is tradition, at least in France, to discuss this experience. Eating is seen as a way of binding up a community around a shared meal one can express himself about (eating as a conversation topic). This notion of communion and community is precisely what sociologists name commensalism. In German, eating properly means eating enough, to satiety and according to social rules, not to give the impression of incorporating food: we should set the hypothesis, drawn from our results, that the community is in the German speaking area (as to suppose that it is more or less homogenic) no place where food is much discussed about, it is rather seen as an instance of controle of the eater (does he eat properly or not?). The hypothesis could be put so: Taste is in German an individual experience which cannot really be expressed and discussed about, instead it is in French an intrinsic property of the food, which has to be discussed by the persons sharing the meal, the sharing of impressions and experiences of the same object binding the guests together. In fact, this question can only be answered and depend after a more precise study by sociologists and linguists.

Supposing that this hypothesis is confirmed, the next question is to what extent the different conceptions of eating and taste are due to linguistic factors. For example, the German morphology is much more flexible than the French one, so that it is much easier to build words on *Essen* like *das Essen, der Eßtisch, die Eßstäbe (food, the dinner table, the*

chopsticks)... than in French on *manger*. Similarly, on *Gabel*, *Löffel* or *Tafel* (*fork*, *spoon*, *table*), for instance, German builds the eating verbs *gabeln*, *löffeln* or *tafeln*. Anyway, similar formations would be possible in French but they do not exist: this could mean that possible formations in language can be blocked because they do not correspond to any experienced referent in the world. How the world is experienced eventually greatly depends on social and cultural representations. As a result, the questions raised by the present analysis make a tight collaboration between linguists, sociologists and physiologists really necessary.

Bibliography:

Fischler, C., Masson, E., (Dir.), 2007, *Manger : Français, Américains et Européens face à l'alimentation*, Paris, Odile Jacob

Farge, S., 2009, « Une comparaison entre les lexiques français et allemand du goût ». In Beltran-Vidal, D., Gautier, L., (Dir), *Les mots de la santé (II), Affaires de goût*, Gap, Louis Jean Imprimeur, Travaux du CRTT

Farge, S., Depierre, A., 2008, « Sensorialités et différences culturelles : l'influence des structures linguistiques », 6^{ème} journée du Sensolier, Diversités culturelles et sensorialités, 9 octobre 2008 (Proceedings)

Lahlou, S., 1998, *Penser manger : alimentation et représentations sociales*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France

Piault, F., (Dir.), 1993, *Le mangeur : menus, mots et maux*, Paris, Autrement, Série Mutations, Mangeurs

1. Former researches in the lexicology of taste
2. Hyperonyms: *manger/ bouffer* in French vs *essen/ fressen* in German
3. Hyponyms: At the crossroad between linguistic structures and culture
4. Human, social and natural sciences working together to fill the gap

1. First insights from former researches in the lexicology of taste:

-French, German and English conceptualise taste differently:

- In English, taste is a trial giving way to a knowledge or the fact of experiencing such a trial (pragmatic view)

- In French, taste is an intrinsic property of an object or the intrinsic ability of a subject to perceive it (cartesian view)

- In German, taste is an individual experience associating an object and a subject experiencing it and seen in its realisation (phenomenological view)

FOCUS: SHALL THE ANALYSIS OF EATING VERBS CONFIRM THESE ASSUMPTIONS? OR SHALL IT DELIVER COMPLEMENTARY OR CONTRADICTIONARY INFORMATION?

2. Do the hyperonyms *manger/ bouffer* in French and *essen/ fressen* refer to the same conception of eating?