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Book Review: Sensing in Social Interaction, the Taste for Cheese in Gourmet Shop by L. Mondada

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► **To cite this version:**

Isabelle Viaud-Delmon. Book Review: Sensing in Social Interaction, the Taste for Cheese in Gourmet Shop by L. Mondada. Perception, In press, 10.1177/03010066231204815 . hal-04308211

HAL Id: hal-04308211

<https://hal.science/hal-04308211>

Submitted on 27 Nov 2023

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L. Mondada: Sensing in social interaction, the taste for cheese in gourmet shop (Learning in Doing: Social, Cognitive, and Computational Perspectives – Series). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 2021; 566 pp.

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The field of food concerns all the senses, and its situated aspect is crucial. Activities related to food have a determining social, cultural and ecological context. In "Sensing in Social Interaction, The Taste for Cheese in Gourmet Shops", Lorenza Mondada (professor of linguistics at the university of Basel, Switzerland) delves into the intricate dynamics of sensory experiences within social interactions. The work, divided into four distinct parts, offers a profound exploration of the intersection between the sensorial and the social. The book is organised around two main objectives. The first one is conceptual and questions how we can think about sensoriality as a sociointeractional phenomenon. The second one aims to offer an interactional approach to multisensoriality in situated actions and is based on a field study: tasting and smelling activities of customers and sellers in cheese shops have been recorded in 11 countries and 11 languages (Catalan, Dutch, Finnish, French, English, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish, Swiss German), producing more than 60 hours of video concerning 600 customers, using multiple cameras, as well as different camera frames.

The first objective is primarily addressed in part I, consisting of two main chapters. The first chapter is purely theoretical, offering a captivating exploration of the anthropology of the senses. This chapter places sensory experiences within the framework of culture, providing a broader perspective. It underscores that reducing our understanding of the senses to what we can measure and observe in humans is incomplete without considering the cultural context. This perspective highlights the potential bias in our exploration of the senses. Personally, I found this chapter to be highly informative about the history of senses and sensory history.

The second objective is covered in parts II, III, and IV, employing a video-based approach to document interactions occurring in a diverse range of gourmet shops involving customers, sellers, and cheese. This approach focuses on capturing language and body gestures frame by frame during the process of selecting and purchasing cheese. These sections are organized sequentially, tracing the sequences that lead to the decision to purchase a specific product. The journey begins with initiating a purchase upon entering the shop (part II, chapters 3 and 4), followed by the exploration of tactile experiences (part III, chapter 5), olfactory sensations (part III, chapter 6), taste perceptions (part IV, chapters 7 and 8), and final assessments (part IV, chapter 9). A conclusion (chapter 10) encapsulates the book's content, emphasizing the distinctive nature of the ethnomethodology and conversation analysis approach in understanding multisensoriality within social interaction.

I am a French scientist, particularly interested in the influence of the social context on multisensory integration, and I enjoy indulging in cheese. Therefore, when I saw the title of this book, I was particularly excited. The author rightly states that smell and taste are probably the least studied of the senses in the field of perception and that smell and taste in interpersonal relations are neglected. However, it quickly became clear that the target audience of the book is not scientists in the field of perception. The book's focus on sociointeractional aspects of sensing makes it more suitable for scholars in the social sciences and humanities. The observational approach adopted in the book, which includes

ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, clashes with the experimental approach, and dilutes the idea of understanding the underlying processes of perception, which are clearly not the primary focus of the book. In the conclusion, the author wraps up her book saying that it has explored “the contemporary debates that animate the study of the senses across disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities” (p. 510). However, readers familiar with experimental approaches to perception in interaction, such as those discussed by Hale et al. in 2020, may regret that the book does not attempt to bridge the gap to these methodologies. Despite its objectives to bring interdisciplinary research to real life, I felt that the study of the embodied and linguistic dimensions of sensing in interaction could be further enriched by cognitive neuroscience-informed exploration through video recordings, analysing how the body engages and coordinates with other bodies.

While the linguistic reports presented in the book did not align with my specific interests and seemed to represent a clash of disciplines, the surrounding context serves as a valuable source of documentation, providing insights into a variety of scientific cultures. Despite this initial divergence, the first chapter offers significant opportunities for learning. It explores the history of the senses and how language can structure perception. The review of sensory experiences related to food spans across a diverse array of fields, which is both impressive and enlightening. The description of Aristotle's model of the five senses is particularly intriguing and brings a refreshing historical perspective. Furthermore, the exploration of the relationship between language and the senses is highly engaging. It highlights how different cultures vary in the level of detail within their linguistic descriptions of specific senses, and this variation in sensory lexicon is intricately linked to cultural-historical factors and ecological adaptations, rather than merely being a reflection of physiological dimensions.

In the course of my reading, I encountered an issue concerning the accuracy of a reference cited on page 15, which does not align with the content it is intended to support. I was eager to read about how sounds are used to heal in the Malaysian rainforest, but it is not in Roseman (1991) that I will learn about it, as indicated in the book. A simple error like this can be corrected in future editions. The correct source for this information is likely to be found in the book by Back and Bull (2003), which is already cited within the book. Nevertheless, this discrepancy raised concerns about the book's scholarly accuracy and the reliability of its citations.

My own conclusion is that, unfortunately, an ethnological and conversation analytic perspective cannot fully address the complexities of sensoriality, as it tends to confine sensorial experiences within the realm of language. Rather than being solely a book on sensing in social interaction, it encompasses a wide array of concepts related to food and its sensorial dimensions. This includes exploring sociopolitical displacements and tensions related to differences in taste and smell concerning aspects such as immigration, changing consumption patterns, food preparation, preservation, and regulations. The book approaches the intricate web of ramifications in food-related activities, connecting them to cultural meanings, socioeconomic structures, and global historical transformations.

In this sense, although the book diverged from my initial expectations, it contributes significantly to a broader understanding of sensory experiences within social contexts. I would recommend this book to specific audiences in the fields of anthropology and linguistics, as well as to anyone intrigued by the economic dimensions of taste. Potential readers outside these fields, and thus the majority of readers of *Perception* readers, might find

it disappointing that the book doesn't extend its exploration into the realm of food perception from a psychophysical and neuroscience perspective.

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