If we have succeeded in our purpose, then the reader will agree that adjectives like tasty or long are subjective because their meaning is inextricably tied to how people can act on the object under assessment. How we are drawn to act in a situation is something we live by, something we experience, that we share, that we sometimes refrain from, and that we signal in language. Adjectives like tasty or long are not subjective in the same way because we have developed conventionalised methods by which we can check, for example, length. How people can act on the object under assessment is thus more predictable, and in that sense we say that long is weakly evaluative. Meanwhile, tasty is strongly evaluative and this is what leads us to disputes which are hard to settle. We take how we act as exemplary and we expect others to agree, where such expectations, grounded on our shared intercorporality, are part and parcel of what we mean. Adjectives like tasty signal our embodied coping, a coping that takes place at a level where subject-other and subject-object are not yet neatly distinguished. What we could call now the paradox of taste, i.e., the fact that taste judgements are subjective but, at the same time, they are comprehensible for others and they are normative, is not at all mysterious when looked at through the lens of embodiment.

Natural language arises in a human setting. Human beings are fleshed minds, minded bodies. This is often not visible when one is doing semantics. The case of subjectivity in the adjectival domain makes it a pressing issue. It prompts us to rethink linguistic meaning, the object of study of semantics.

In chapter 2 we tried to lay down the phenomena to be accounted for. We made an effort to keep matters as descriptive as possible there, in contrast to how in recent years these phenomena have been hogged by the analyses that semanticists defend.

We presented in chapter 3 two debates in semantics that cross our research question. The first addresses the question concerning how one should formalise the meaning of gradable adjectives. The second examines the issue of the subjectivity of adjectives like tasty, and tries to find a way to insert the subject back
Chapter 7. Conclusions and perspectives

into a semantic framework that excluded it, by design. The theories we reviewed yield observations one should account for. However, the discussion has mainly focused on what mathematical model one should devise, what linguistic tools one should employ, what “-ism” in semantics one should support. We tried to step back from this discussion for we think it takes us into a cul-de-sac in which the picture of subjectivity becomes a strange one. The battle about where to place a judge assumes an individualistic view on subjectivity, and the subject we end up with is objectivised. With some distance now, we can say that the notion of subjectivity assumed in the debate is a strongly Cartesian one. Intuitive as this notion may seem, it is a rather unpopular one in many philosophical circles. We have taken a critical stance towards it, and we have tried to show how a non-Cartesian view can be adopted while one keeps doing semantics.

We saw in chapter 4 that, according to Kant, the same ability, reflective judgement, allows us to claim the agreement of others when we say something like This painting is beautiful and This book has 262 pages. We went beyond Kant in claiming that this same ability is behind the normativity of judgements like This cake is tasty and This is a long book. Reflective judgement allows us to take our affective responsiveness beyond ourselves. We can produce rational justifications for our judgements sometimes, but not all the time. Taste judgements claim the agreement of others, but they do so not based on concepts. Taste judgements demand that others should respond as I do, and I respond as I do because this is how we should respond. This sounds like a tongue-twister, but it sums up the condition of possibility of all cognition, or at least that is how we could put it if we go very far in our reading of Kant (but we do not need to go that far).

We saw as well in chapter 4 that first-person ascriptions of psychological states were a topic of interest for Wittgenstein, and we found a valuable insight in his own take on so-called avowals. Claims like I am in pain, similar to I find this cake tasty, are related to how people act, and this relation is crucial if one wants to get out of the Cartesian trap. Wittgenstein defended an anti-Cartesian view of subjectivity, one that some have called expressivist or even behaviourist, but our interpretation of his work rejects these labels because they miss more than they capture. There is no mind without characteristic expressions, i.e., gestures, facial expressions, and patterns of behaviour by which we make sense of our fellow human being’s goings-on. But the mind, the subject, and meaning are not reducible to behaviour. Inner and outer are elements in a dialectic that, if broken, leads to a misconception of both the subject and the object. Avowals are a variety of certainties, of claims that we make but that we seem to be unable to prove to others if we are asked to do so. Certainties are examples of claims that we do not make on the basis of evidence but which play a most crucial role in shaping the knowledge space and the logical space. Taste judgements share a number of features with certainties. Like certainties, taste judgements play a regulative role in shaping our embedding in a social setting. There is no subject without others.

We think phenomenology from the Merleau-Pontyian stream gives us Ari-
adne’s thread to walk out of the Cartesian maze. This is how we started chapter 5. A human being can be seen as having an objective body but also as having a lived body, her flesh. We are in the world through our bodies. This is how we cognise, and this is the locus of linguistic meaning when we talk about how we affectively respond to our surroundings. One can try and cut this seemingly intractable mess out of semantics, thinking that it does not have enough structure to be part of the stable core of linguistic meaning. But if we conceptualise intentionality via affordances, we can find some structure, enough to let us see how different people can converge in their linguistic signaling. Affordances are ways in which we are drawn to respond to aspects of the environment as complex intentional agents with abilities which are, by and large, shared with others. When we think of intentional agents this way, the subject is not objectivised. When we look at evaluative judgements as a means through which we communicate our responsiveness to relevant affordances, we see how agents can achieve intersubjective agreement. We are out of the maze.

Can this view of linguistic meaning be modeled formally? Yes, it can. In chapter 6, we sketched an update system giving basic rules for the interpretation of evaluative judgements of various sorts. Intentionality can be reconceived as a broader phenomenon that goes beyond truth-conditional content. But going beyond is not an attempt to install a parallel sort of meaning running next to the one semanticists have tamed. Broader means more encompassing. Embodied intentionality underlies ordinary judgements and evaluative judgements, it accommodates the difference in subjectivity between claims like This cake is tasty and This is a long film, and it makes it easy to see what we mean by She finds this cake tasty or I find this a long book. (Do you?) If linguistic meaning is conceived in terms of how an intentional state changes when we come to accept a statement, and if intentional states are states of agents who are affectively rich and alive, we arrived safely to our destination. Natural language arises in a human setting. Human beings are fleshed minds, minded bodies. Embodied intentionality leads to an account of meaning that frees us from the paradox of taste. We have re-shaped the object of study of semantics to get a better understanding of the sense in which tasty and other gradable adjectives can be said to be subjective. This is probably not the only way out of the labyrinth but it is the one we found. There is no knock-down argument here for why the reader should take this way, but we hope to have shown that it is an illuminating one.

Every piece of research has a scope and therefore limitations. Perhaps the most salient one in this enquiry is a certain lack in linguistic depth, in particular (but not only) regarding syntax. We have hand-waved for instance differences in attributive and predicative form, admissibility of prepositional phrases, control structures, etc., leaving lots of open questions and maybe creating some disappointment. We have also been able to do just too little empirical research into actual dialogue where adjectives and sentences of the sort we have studied feature in actual conversation. We believe that the whole discussion concerning subjec-
tivity in the adjectival domain is in urgent need for a systematic empirical study. Most of the research produced in the past years, including the research reported here, turns around theoretical problems and hypothetical dialogues. Linguistics gains much from corpus-based research into naturally occurring language. The kind of problem we have investigated calls for empirical research into actual dialogue. To get a better understanding of what is at stake when we exchange evaluative judgements, we need to leave the armchair and get our hands dirty. Our own research belongs to the margins of linguistics, it more clearly belongs to philosophy of language. But philosophy of language too would very much benefit from a more empirically informed discussion. When the debate concerns mainly the “-ism” one should adopt, one loses sight of the very issue at hand, and while this might not be regrettable if one believes that philosophy of language is a purely speculative affair, this is not how we see the discipline. Philosophy of language should care (more) about language.

One could also object to this investigation that it is “too continental”. How can we ask the semanticist of a more or less formal appetite to partake in phenomenology? Can one cross that bridge safely? More importantly, is there any good reason to cross that bridge? We hope to have shown that the crossing can be fruitful and enlightening, and that one should not see it as a betrayal of the goal of semantics. We want to understand linguistic meaning. Phenomenology investigates the conditions of possibility of intentionality. Seeing semantics and phenomenology as opposed camps can only reflect a prior decision that no bridge shall be laid. The idea that analytic and continental philosophy should be kept separate might be useful in some, but certainly not in all contexts. Our research exercise exemplifies a line of thinking that calls this idea into question. It also shows that one can be critical of the foundations of formal disciplines, in particular of semantics, and at the same time keep a constructive attitude and an optimistic tone about what a formal discipline like semantics can yield.

Finally, what seems to be the central question: can there be subjective meaning? The answer is “No” if one maintains an individualistic view on subjectivity, for in that case one fails to explain how intersubjective understanding is possible. The answer is also “No” if one holds on to a view according to which meaning only has to do with what is or could be the case, because the subject is not a fact of the world, or at least it should not be reduced to that. The answer is “Yes” if one is careful enough in seeing that it is not meaning that is subjective. Subjects speak languages which have meaningful expressions. Subjects qua embodied agents can disclose to each other their inner lives because inner and outer are two sides of a coin.