Every language has a way of talking about seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. In about a quarter of the world's languages, grammatical evidentials express means of perception (visual, and non-visual) and information source in general. Lexical verbs covering perception and cognitive processes may or may not form a special subclass of verbs. Their meanings vary. In some languages verbs of vision subsume cognitive meanings (knowledge and understanding). In others, cognition is associated with a verb of auditory perception, touch, or smell. Grammatical, and lexical, expression of perception and cognition share a number of features. ‘Vision’ is not the universally preferred means of perception. In numerous cultures, taboos are associated with forbidden visual experience. Vision may be considered intrusive and aggressive, and linked with access to power. In contrast, ‘hearing’ and ‘listening’ are the main avenues for learning, understanding and ‘knowing’. The studies presented in this book set out to explore how these meanings and concepts are expressed in languages of Africa, Oceania, and South America. The final section of this chapter offers an overview of the volume.
languages—dealing with various aspects of the linguistic expression of perception and cognition. These can be encoded in grammar, through dedicated means for grammatical expression of information source known as 'evidentiality', perceptual distinctions in demonstratives, overtones of various complementation techniques, and many more.

As Franz Boas (a founding father of modern linguistics) put it, languages differ not in what one can say but rather in what kind of information must be stated (Boas 1938: 132). A certain concept can be expressed grammatically in one language but only by lexical means in another. For example, a certain language may have a two gender system (masculine and feminine), while another may have three genders, and yet another one may have no grammatical gender at all—just words for ‘man’ and ‘woman’. Information acquired by seeing something can be expressed through the demonstrative system in one language, and through a special ‘visual evidential’ in another, while a third would just use a lexical verb ‘see, look’. The ways of expressing information source are summarised in §2.

Every language of the world has lexical items (typically, verbs) of perception and cognition. This volume sets out to provide case studies on this so far understudied field in linguistics, dealing with the connection between language and the senses, and the varieties of perceptual language cross-linguistically. There are other possibilities of organizing the senses socially than those frequently referred to in earlier work on the topic—as Majid and Levinson (2011: 7) point out, ‘languages are windows on the senses that we can hardly afford to ignore’. Of course, the notions of perception and cognition are relevant not just for linguistics. They have been in the centre of attention of a variety of other disciplines, among them psychology, philosophy, and anthropology in their various guises.

Anthropological perspective is another matter. The ways in which visual and auditory perception are conceptualized within a language may correlate with cultural practices, transmission of knowledge and ways of communication. Vision is the preferred ‘sense’ in many, especially Western, cultures (Ong 1982). Hearing is highly valued in others. Vedic texts in Hindu India are a case in point. These sacred verses are transmitted through oral recital (notwithstanding the fact that they also exist as written texts; cf. Levering 1989). In pre-colonial Hindu societies, knowledge of the Vedic texts was off-limits to members of lower castes. The Ramayana describes how boiling lead was poured into the ears of a lower-caste person who might accidentally overhear a Brahman reciting Vedic verses. Hearing something one is not allowed to may be dangerous. This goes together with the ‘danger’ of seeing something one is not supposed to;