

Food Codes in the Culture of Quality

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Abstract: The paper explores the notions of food codes and food trends as a fundamental means of achieving quality of life from the perspective of semiotics and linguistics. Cultural studies and pragmatics provide interdisciplinary methodology to unravel how food codes can be obscured in inconspicuous ways, but also decoded and assigned significant connotations. Knowledge about the emerging culture of food, as well as the ability to decode the ambiguous terminology of natural/ artificial food are both essential in making informed choices as to the quality of individual life. Being nourished reads as assimilating food qualities not only literally in the consumer's organism, but also metaphorically into the spiritual disposition one thereby acquires. For that reason, food culture also involves the transfer of food qualities and choices upon human values and life quality in general. The paper aims to verify this by taking a comprehensive insight into these closely interrelated issues.

Keywords: Food codes, Quality, Food culture, Linguistic pragmatics

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Davis (1991), the domain of pragmatics includes the speaker's communicative intentions, the uses of language involving such intentions, and the recipient strategies of determining these intentions. However, language is not always dictated by communicative intentions, but, on the contrary, by the intent of obscuring meaning, such as in the case of E-numbered food codes. If Gricean implicatures are grounded on common knowledge, the latter is insufficient for the purpose of decoding the hundreds of E codes newly introduced in consumer usage. Furthermore, most authors insist on pragmatic interpretation according to the context language is set in. Essentially, pragmatics provides an account of how words are used to convey information in

context (Kempson 1988). Thus, it is essential that the pragmatic aspects of meaning be analysed in specific contexts. These are in our case food-related scopes ranging from dietary prescription, supermarket shelf indication or food label, and consumer culture at large. In this context, the paper aims at revealing the culture-specific pragmatic features of food and the relativity of food-codes. Given the degree of cross-cultural variation, intercultural encounters carry the impending risk of pragmatic failure. However, failure in decoding meaning of recent food codes also has different grounds, since the E-code system is already generalised throughout Europe without being duly understood by consumers.

Diet and food choice has long been the core of living styles across the world and along time, as the latter have constantly been dictated by and organised

around the fundamental need of eating. The term 'diet' itself is derived from the Latin word *diaeta* 'prescribed way of living, diet', from the ancient Greek word *diaita*, originally meaning 'way of life, regimen, dwelling', which is in turn formed from *diasthai* 'to lead one's life' by means of back-formation (OED). In this semantic context, nourishment results not only in the literal assimilation of food qualities by eaters, but also in the figurative incorporation of certain pragmatic qualities. Thus, food culture analysis also engages with the pragmatic meaning of food qualities and with the transfer of dietary choices upon human values and life quality in general. Therefore, global tendencies of food codes are directly connected to food culture-specific identities. The evolution of life quality and consumer identity at large may thus be analysed in terms of the development of practices related to producing, preserving, or simply consuming food.

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The paper looks at a series of linguistic turns of phrase in the realm of food codes, as they have evolved along a cultural timeline, in different contexts. It is an attempt to elucidate their meanings, their pragmatic functions and effects from a linguistic point of view. It continues by analysing some of the latest food codes standing for additives also called 'E numbers'. Pragmatic analysis reveals the meanings behind these inconspicuous codes, seemingly devised as a method of obscuring actual meaning. Thus, linguistic knowledge on food codes and awareness to denotation and significance becomes essential, as reading food labels entails significant consequences upon life quality in general.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the point of view of evolving food culture, notions of quality are under the permanent dominion of considerable pragmatic relativity. Food choice has long been a more complex matter than mere taste preference or economic affordability. Humans have gained knowledge of the valuable or nutritious significance of food, thus starting to eat distasteful foods or spend exceedingly to obtain calorically wasteful foods. Moreover, some foods are valued in certain cultures and taboo in others, some are considered esteemed delicacies or repellent and threatening in divergent cultural codes. Taste appears to be dictated by a multitude of cultural and psychological factors, which prove that food carries meanings. These meanings offer insights into people's mentalities, prejudices, and understanding of life quality in general. As food codes differ extensively in different contexts, their pragmatic connotations are governed by relativity. The dietary ideal of a certain age or culture becomes an indication of cultural values and ideas upon life (e.g. round shapes in Antiquity and Renaissance vs. slender and then undernourished at present). Weight-reducing diets recommended by modern popular culture builds its notion of ideal beauty upon images of slimness, irrespective of life quality. Even cookbooks of nutritional literature may be decoded as indicators of social ideas of whom consumers desire to be. For instance, preference for rare, exotic ingredients may be read as a desire to become cosmopolitan or connoisseur; the passion for organic or natural food suggests the will of psychological cleansing and naturalization; traditional food choices imply personal values related to security or even ethnocentric life culture, etc (Albala 2002: 1-3). Accordingly, the consumption of certain kinds of food forthrightly embodies the accomplishment of certain personal

qualities from the quality-of-life standpoint. Such decoding practices illustrate in what meaningful ways food codes speak for the consumer's own ideal self-image. Attitude towards food codes reveals deeper life philosophies or politics, referred to as 'food ideologies' by Albala (2002: 3).

3.1. From food to food science: the first euphemisms

The great changes in food culture that have been brought about by modernization and industrialization are discussed by Michael Pollan in *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (2006). The author explores the appetites that have shaped our evolution and the considerable implications our food choices have upon our health and the future of our planet, in terms of quality content. This idea is continued in *In Defence of Food* (2008), which explains the confusion about correct or proper food choice in the Western diet as an effect of the professionalization of nourishment. More people around the world have come to consume the products of food science rather than the products of nature, which has triggered significant effects upon quality of life. This view is held in various guises by Pollan as he scrutinizes the paradox according to which the more health-conscious people are, the less healthy they become. Western diet practices have already established a cultural tradition of swiftness which elucidates anomalous food choices.

What is more, the industrialization of eating has triggered the shift of food culture from quality to quantity (Pollan 2008: 118). This trend has been set quite recently, starting with the beginning of the nineteenth century. With nutritional science providing an explanation of life in terms of chemicals, talk of nutrients and vitamins became utter vogue at the beginning of the 20th century. While

vitamins, (from L. *vita* 'life' + *-amines* 'nitrogen organic compounds'), were first extracted naturally, industrialization soon started to promote mass synthesized versions of nutrients. Science starts to identify invisible substances that are considered to bring health benefits to those who dutifully consume them. The enthusiasm about health-promoting vitamins starts in the 1920s, as the rising middle class took note of the benefits of these magical substances.

Little by little, food is being pushed aside in the popular imagination of what it means to eat, which generates a further ongoing shift from eating food to eating nutrients in certain prescribed quantities, all while the rates of diet-related diseases increased (Pollan 2008: 19-22). Therefore, official dietary guidelines were finally set in 1977, calling on Americans to reduce their consumption of red meat, incriminated for the harm. Subsequent criticism and pressure from the industries and cattle-ranchers dictated a more subtle language: meat reduction was replaced by the more 'politically correct' indication to 'reduce saturated fat intake'. These subtle changes in wording triggered a whole new way of thinking about food and life quality. This 'linguistic capitulation' is not merely another way of putting it, but the beginning of an extensive new shift of paradigm. Government dietary guidelines start avoiding classic food terminology, which comes dressed in scientific euphemism. It is not chicken, beef or fish that consumers may find in the revised guidelines, but 'obscure, invisible, tasteless – and politically unconnected - substance that may or may not lurk in them' (Pollan 2008: 23-24). The distance is short from this point to the total dominion of chemicals which threatens to modify not only our perception of our globalized culture, but very literally our physical sense of being.

3.2. The utter paradigm shift: ‘E’ food codes

The extensive change brought about by industrialized food production noticeably concerned the usage of synthetic substances. Psychologically, people form judgments about the desirability of food according to its appearance. As early as the medieval period, Albala (2002: 245) discovered the predilection for highly cloured and spiced foods as an emblem of ‘cosmopolitan’ cooking. Colour, above all, naturally provides visual information about food quality, as it indicates degrees of attractiveness, maturity, or decay. However, the natural colour of food may be altered artificially in order to boost its appeal or to mask its flaws. Synthetics are more durable than natural colours and they make food more eye-catching and less costly. Since the discovery of these ‘advantages’, however, the acceptability of food dyes has become controversial, engendering public debate and safety concerns. Additives have been assigned unique ‘E’-numbers to standardize them and to give them a less intimidating resonance. However, it is as common to employ food additives to disguise inferior products, as it is to mask the ingredients used by number-codes.

In fact, toxic foods are so widespread today that they have become ‘natural’ in the sense of customary. The highly esteemed notion of culinary *aesthetics* has deteriorated profoundly in the recent past, especially due to the introduction of artificial food additives. Though preservatives were first used to prevent the corruption of certain transient foods, they have been played down as the very ingredients which corrupt food, through an ironical pragmatic twist. Food that is highly processed, pasteurized, refined, aromatized, and especially delightfully coloured also contains the germs of new-fangled diseases. Public unease regarding

health-threatening food is subverted by specialists’ innocuous precautions, such as ‘acceptable daily intake’. This relative and equivocal assertion refers to the daily additive intake in terms of body weight which may be consumed *per se*, but not in addition to other similar chemicals existent in other products which are consumed simultaneously.

Another case in point for relativity may be subsumed to the tangle of pragmatic implication. According to the Gricean account of pragmatics, words are often vehicles for conveying implicit meaning, also called *implicature*. For instance, labels on more and more products promise the lack of E-numbers in the attempt to pass as organic, natural, or eco-friendly products. In food labels or advertisements such as ‘free from colours’ or ‘free from preservatives’, the speaker implies more than it is said. Such utterances, for instance, connote the notion of quality, as the communicator implicates that products which do not contain preservatives or artificial colours are superior and preferable to other kinds of foods. The realm of food additives is teeming with similar hidden messages to such an extent that the matter cannot be discussed here exhaustively for want of space. To limit the scope of the analysis to a sample, food colours have been chosen as an illustrative focus on food codes. Additives in general have been disguised under the neutral E-number codifications, whether they are artificially produced or they are of natural origin. As it is too painstaking to learn the endless lists of E-numbers, consumers have been brought to a total level of confusion as to what substances numbers denote. Not only has the reverse effect been achieved, but consumers are weary and distrustful of any type of E, whether it may be hazardous or harmless.

At a semantic level, E codes have thus acquired pejorative connotations in colloquial language, which have resulted

in a similar effect in production and commercial contexts. Moreover, quite indiscriminately, the entire range of food colours has been indicted, whether they are natural or artificial, harmful or inoffensive. Nonetheless, most natural ingredients are also codified by *E* numbers in the European system (e.g. vitamin C is *E300*). For that reason, catch-phrases like ‘free from *E*-numbers’ implying the lack of artificial ingredients are inconsistent, whereas it would not be conceivable to avoid the presence of all *E* numbers from nutrition.

The confusion partly results from the fact that both natural and artificial additives are codified as dubiously by means of *E*-numbers, which is a strict one-letter alphabet. Confusion also occurs in cases when consumers might be convinced that certain *E* numbers are of natural origin. For instance, *E101* (*Vitamina B2*), while being naturally present in eggs, milk, and vegetal products, is nonetheless obtained from the genetically modified *Bacillus subtilis*. Another illustration, *curcumin*, which is extracted from the tree *Curcuma longa*, is more often industrially produced by chemical synthesis. Similarly, *E160* is considered a natural colorant, but *E160e* (*beta-apo-8-carotenal*) is artificially produced, though it also occurs naturally in oranges and tangerines. Moreover, *E160f* (*ethyl ester of beta-apo-8-carotenic acid*) is chemically created, as implied by the uninviting name. Thus, the same *E*-number, when followed by a different lowercase letters (*a*, *b*, *c*, etc), denotes completely different kinds of substances. The fact that the same *E*-number (e.g. *E160*) may be natural or synthetic is only indicated by the succeeding letters. It is also noteworthy that many of the additives considered ‘natural’ may have suffered genetic modification, such as *caramel* (*E150*), *vegetable carbon* (*E153*), etc. (www.food-info.net).

Furthermore, *E*-number mystification

may sometimes carry more profound implications. For example, *carmine*, codified by the generic *E120* (Am. E. *Crimson Lake*, *Cochineal*, or *Natural Red 4*) may be derived from the cochineal insect, which renders it awkward in the case of allergic people and vegetarians, or in the case of religiously-imposed diets like *kashrut* or *halaal*. Despite the fiery controversies concerning this particular additive, food industries have undermined the inscription of the word *cochineal* on the label, which remains questionable, as in numerous other cases.

It appears that the *E*-codification system does not respect some of the main principles of pragmatics, as required by Grice’s rules to be observed in rational communication. Some of these are: the maxim of quantity ‘Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)’; the maxim of relation: ‘Be relevant’; the maxim of manner: ‘Avoid obscurity of expression’, ‘Avoid ambiguity’ (Grice 1989, 269-82). Some labels also flaunt the quality maxims ‘Do not say what you believe to be false’ and ‘Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence’, in cases when they make contradictory claims. For instance, the presence of some chemical ingredients contradicts co-existing labels such as ‘all-natural ingredients’, ‘bio’, ‘organic product’, etc. But the language of ‘organic’ food itself has grown to be so popular that natural food is simulated by disguised junk food merely by virtue of its label. In addition, politically-correct dieticians prefer claiming that there are no ‘good’ or ‘bad’ foods, capitulating yet again to postmodern relativity and to the *natural-versus-artificial* ambiguity. In conclusion, food labels, as well as discourses on food quality are misleading in a number of ways, as shown above.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis indicates a genuine modification of paradigm concerning food culture and food codes now labelled more elusively than ever before. Although E-codes have become the universal system of encoding food, this organisation has done more to confound consumers rather than to provide a simplified scheme of common reference. This project has started as a struggle upon the terminology of food additives, requiring their introduction on labels and the comprehensive generalisation of the newly-imposed codes. These have altogether replaced comprehensible words, concealing the actual ingredients contained by processed food. While proper nutrition is an important condition for quality of life and

well-being, the word 'malnutrition' has often altered its meaning too. It no longer implies lack of food, but lack of nutrients or chaotic consumption of empty-value foods, which diminishes the overall quality of life. Nonetheless, ever more consumers are attaining a higher level of knowledge on the issue, driven by the desire to unravel the genuine meaning of food label terminology. A number of synthetic additives have been incriminated and many more are currently under suspicion. It is therefore indispensable to become food-code literate, as this area of (popular) culture remains essential for human life quality. A final remark would be that reading labels remains insufficient in the absence of a dutiful training in the field of pragmatics.

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