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## IMPLICATIONS OF QUALITY IN FOOD METAPHORS

Motto: "Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are."

- Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of*

*Taste: or Meditations on Transcendental*

*Gastronomy* (1826)

**Abstract:** *The paper hypothesizes that common use of food metaphors have a thrust upon cultural differences and meanings in relation to quality. The underlying cognitive schemata of metaphors highlight various approaches to cultural values and ethical status according to food-conscious attitudes. For instance, the "fast food" metaphor stands for competitive capitalist life-styles, while "slow food" encourages ethical choice and connotes individualism running against globalization. It is argued that metaphors are carriers of hidden meaning and they reveal significant cultural information, thus being a good resource for the investigation of human language and reasoning. Essentially, the conceptual metaphor of QUALITY AS FOOD largely plays upon the assumption that food and quality are closely interrelated both linguistically and culturally. Ultimately, the ability to decode figurative language in the context of the developing culture of food is crucial in making knowledgeable choices concerning the quality of life.*

**Keywords:** *Food metaphor, Quality, Conceptual linguistics, Conceptual mappings*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Given the function of metaphor as a communicative code, the paper explores the use of metaphorical language connected to food and the transfer of dietary choices upon more abstract human qualities. Thus, the analysis of food metaphors engages with the semantic aspects of food qualities.

### 2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The paper takes a cognitive approach

to language use by examining a series of expressions containing metaphors related to food, taste and cooking encountered in common speech. The corpus of metaphors is selected from dictionaries of idioms, as well as from natural discourse, which proves to be highly resourceful. Cognitive linguistics and cultural studies provide interdisciplinary methodology to reveal how food metaphors can be read and assigned significant connotations.

Linguists and rhetoricians have traditionally regarded metaphorical expressions as ornamental and rather

inconsequential in language analysis. However, cognitive linguists have greatly shifted the perspective since the 1980s, starting with Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). At the time, cognitive linguistics proposed a reading of metaphors as insightful conceptual devices that structure our view of the world. Thorough metaphor research has since progressed in the acknowledgement of the deep-seated impact of conceptual metaphor. Consequently, linguistic knowledge on food metaphors and awareness of underlying connotations become essential in that they generate significant corollaries to life quality in general.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Food is analyzed as a powerful metaphor with a loaded meaning in terms of quality. The manifold implications of metaphors in general offer insights into people's mentalities and attitudes to life, notions of quality being especially perceptible in the use of *food*-related metaphors. The range of cultural practices revolving around food also maps out the diversity of cognitive domains related to good/ bad food. Different kinds of food straightforwardly reflect the assumption of certain personal qualities, according to the saying "one is what one eats". Thus, food acquires an ontological quality from the point of view of identity metaphors described by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Additionally, food habits and practices provide significant criteria in assigning socio-cultural identity and organizing group hierarchies. For all these reasons, food becomes a major source of moral, social, cultural, and even political understanding. Consequently, making sense of metaphors reveals the meaningful ways food speaks for people's conceptions and values.

### 3.1. FOOD QUALITY PARADIGMS

The evolution of food culture has brought about extensive alterations in Western diet practices. Departing from traditional eating habits, the West has drifted towards the culture of swiftness which dictates anomalous "fast-food" choices, finally to revalorize "slow food" and "organic" or "natural" quality food. Labels on food hilariously indicate that the ingredients contained are "all natural", as if this is not normally to be expected or assumed. Such labels point to the fact that food today may be other than "natural", as it does not always come from nature – this being in fact exceptional and ostentatiously labeled.

In the age of globalization, there is a growing anxiety and suspicion towards food deviating from the traditional authentic taste. Nowadays, food choice is dictated by the dominant claim asserted by the food processing industry, which perpetuates its established ascendancy through alimentary prescription. Fast-food commercials position the food practices they promote as superior to traditional ones. Given the fact that processed food is considered as lacking real authentic taste, they try to reassign quality to that which is looked down upon as unhealthy (Heldke in Curtin 1992: 300-303). The food industry is often incriminated for an insatiable "appetite" to boost returns, thus privileging quantity over quality. Thereby, food industrialization is said to have spawned the great shift from quality to quantity in food culture (Pollan 2008: 118). This further generates confusion and concernment as to our perception of well-being and life quality in general.

The dominant paradigm of industrial agriculture which upholds productivity and efficiency is grounded upon the mechanistic perspective upon nature. The awareness of depleting natural resources and reducing the quality of life has

prompted an extensive shift towards sustainability. However, standard fast food all-plastic practices still enact an utter disengagement with the natural world. Nonetheless, the conceptual shift back to nature is conspicuous from the widespread use of naturalizing metaphors, starting with the predominant *bio-* combining form. Other expressions such as *mother earth* indicate that nature is perceived as nurturing, while the preference for *downshifting* and *living off the fat of the land* also connote self-sustenance by means of the nourishing resources of the land.

Moreover, power relations are further enhanced by the restrictions on food. In a global context, food carries a more compelling meaning and it plays an essential role in the ideology of purity pollution. This ideology raises a crucial question of human dignity. While right to good food and quality food is desirable and could be defended in the case against toxic food, however, free choice on moral grounds is not always possible, as shown in Curtin (1992). The impediment in enjoying free choice of food is affording quality food, as well as education and moral capacity to exercise this freedom. Industrial food culture has largely disoriented and disarranged the masses' capacity of discriminating between different kinds of food, confusing good/bad categories. Many of those who can afford to eat quality food find themselves restricted by their diminishing life-styles, which helps dissipate food hierarchies. The few health-conscious people who also afford to achieve quality as the natural taste of food do so by virtue of cultural as well as financial assets which are requisite conditions.

Discourses which regulate food and food habits also present metaphors for social hierarchies, as class and status can be conceptualized in terms of food. For example, in Western consumer societies, eating delicacies and refined food is

associated with the wealth of the upper classes, *i.e.* "the upper crust", while potatoes are consumed by the poor, hence unimportant people are seen as "small potatoes". This trend has reversed to some extent latterly, as unrefined foods labelled "organic" become more cherished, more expensive, and thus the mark of sophistication. With the rise of slow-food, farmers promote local, artisan foods against the pressures of globalization enforced by the food industry. Consequently, food has become a metaphor for cultural resistance and identity preservation. The predilection for certain conceptual metaphors suggests the modification of paradigms from *nature as machine* to *nature as person*.

### 3.2. CONCEPTUAL FOOD METAPHORS

Recent studies on metaphor have highlighted the paramount relevance of conceptual schemas and their ethical connotations. Following this line of reasoning, the present study espouses a cognitive understanding of metaphor as a mapping process from a source domain to a target domain (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Metaphor is a device by which we apply and comprehend one domain of experience in terms of another domain. For instance, the target domains of quality or values are perceived in terms of the source domain of food or nature. The more abstract target domains are usually grounded in shared experiences of reality which are less abstract.

This last section attempts to elucidate what these metaphorical mappings reveal about our cultural and cognitive schemas. For that reason, the source domain of food facilitates the grasping of several target domains most recurrently activated by food metaphors. Given the importance of food in our life, food is ubiquitous as a source domain mapping human features and dispositions, conduct, desires, ideas,

and other abstractions. This exploration traces those mappings of food employed to connote personal features, individual or common identity, and other target conceptual domains which are related to the notion of quality. All these target domains are grounded on the experiential source domain of food and entail an array of metaphorical connotations.

Food metaphors are also used in conceptualizing non-food categories like persons or social status. Being used to negotiate individual quality, as well as social identity, these basic devices of our ordinary conceptual system appear to have ethical implications. Several types of food-styles epitomizing life-styles can be identified. For instance, fast food stands for competitive capitalism, while slow food connotes ethical individualism as opposed to globalizing trends. The phrase “fast-food nation” (Schlosser 2002) has been used to refer to the American society, which is seen as an epitome of standardised expediency.

Some of the most recurring metaphors we use to conceptualize identities epitomize current cultural perspectives, while conveying quality undertones. The overarching conceptual metaphor *a person is food* best indicates that identities are often constructed in terms of foodstuffs and food ways. For instance, “to eat someone alive” connotes antagonism, just as “to make hamburger/ mincemeat out of someone” means to destroy, both implying that human beings are conceptualized as food.

Usually, the immediate corollaries of this kind of metaphors are value connotations. When a person is viewed as food, this may carry concealed positive or derogatory meanings. For example, people who are seen as “the salt of the earth” are good and honest. On the contrary, a “bad egg”, a “bad apple”, or a “rotten apple” is a bad person who makes others around bad by pernicious influence. Another category of metaphors where people are

conceptualized as food are important people, who can be “big enchilada”, “big cheese”, or “top banana”, while someone (or something) unimportant is “small fry”, “small beer”, or “small potatoes”. It follows that the choice of food metaphors entails the symbolic assimilation of certain qualities by eaters.

The expression “you are what you eat” is thus comprehensible beyond the physicality of nutrient absorption. The idea of food as a metaphor for the eater’s identity can be extended to national stereotyping in terms of food metaphors. For example, America is the archetypal “fast-food nation”, the British are referred to as “roastbeefs” by the French, and a “banana republic” typifies a deprived country which is governed poorly by corrupt leaders.

Moreover, expressions articulated on the conceptual metaphor *sexual / gender aspects are food* reveal understandings of gender in contemporary Western societies. For instance, the term “beefcake” is used to refer to a handsome man, while “cheesecake” is used for girls. The man who “brings home the bacon” is the one who provides for his family, as masculine qualities like virility and force are associated with the consumption of meat. Food can also be employed in references to sexual appetite, hunger and pleasure, which are common for both the alimentary and the sexual domain.

These major metaphor schemata generate the conceptualization of target domains as bearing the qualities of food. Thus, they can be seen as high-quality, nutritious, and abundant or unwholesome, toxic, and scarce. Moreover, qualities such as refinement and tastefulness are seen in opposition to simplicity or rustic food-styles; cornucopia or plenty versus hunger or shortage; enjoyableness or sweetness against unpleasantness or bitterness. The prominence of sweet flavours apparently pervades popular imagination. Sweet taste is universally cherished and, by

implication, it connotes a positive or optimistic sense. Thus, food terms of endearment revolve around sweetness (e.g. “sugar”, “honey”) and an “eye candy” is a very attractive person who is “tasty” to look at.

Salt is the other ingredient that is indispensable in our daily meals, hence being highly praised. The idiom “to be worth one’s salt” implying worthiness makes reference to the fact that Roman soldiers were paid a “salary” in the form of salt. People described as “the salt of the earth” are appreciated as the best or noblest of society (Heritage 2009). Countless other expressions display the conceptualization of salt in relation to highly cherished and desirable qualities. Different other tastes of food are applied to human temperament, bearing either positive or negative undertones. Commonly, sweet and tasty foods are associated with good temperament, positive qualities, and values (as in being “sweet-tempered”). On the other hand, tasteless or bitter food is used to imply a negative appraisal of character. Things or people lacking quality and ill-tempered people are viewed as “bitter” or having “no taste”. Jokes may also be “tasteless”, meaning they are unpleasant or poor quality.

The examples quoted above illustrate the metaphoric schema *food is (lack of) value/ quality*. A great diversity of metaphors are underpinned by this cognitive schema. A selection of examples found in our corpus research is worth mentioning: if something is “cheesy”, it means it is cheap, inauthentic, of poor quality; something that is “not worth a hill of beans” is worthless. If something is “a bit of a curate’s egg”, it is only good in parts. When something that is worthless or does not work well is acquired, it is described as “buying a lemon”. Somebody or something that does not “cut the mustard” fails to reach the required standard. The ones who “take the cake” are

decidedly the best or worst of something, while “pieces of the same cake” stand for things that have the same qualities. However, tastes are not always equivalent, since “one man’s food is another man’s poison. Other may be of the contrary opinion that “what is good/ sauce for the goose is good/ sauce for the gander”, suggesting something should be as much appreciated by other persons as well. A good situation which becomes even better is likened to the “icing on the cake”, but one should not try to “over-egg the pudding”, because they might spoil that thing by trying to improve it excessively. Objects (such as cars) can be “souped up” if their quality is improved by changing or adding supplementary “ingredients”.

Similarly, positive personal attributes, qualities, and character in general are commonly referred to in terms of food. The “crème de la crème” or “cream of the crop” is the very best sort of people. “Cream rises to the top” is a metaphorical expression connoting a good person or idea which is eventually noticed, just as cream rises on top of a coffee. Also, freshness has bearing on the definition of quality, given that fresh food is a decisive condition of quality. For example, the idiom “fresh from the oven” applies to anything that is new, instantly activating additional implications of gratification or good quality. These conceptualizations function as qualities belonging to humans or objects in terms of food quality and perceived taste.

As it has been seen, food metaphors, as well as discourses on food quality are revealing in a number of ways. They illustrate how ideas are conceptualized and comprehended in terms of the highly significant source domain of food. While avoiding undue generalizations, the existence of several cross-culturally shared conceptual metaphors is to be remarked. Natural cognitive mechanisms produce conceptual and linguistic similarities, especially in the area of basic tastes like

sweetness and bitterness.

Nonetheless, given that metaphors are typically culture-specific, food metaphors are often not automatically processed. Although eating is also among our physical experiences, tastes are not always common to all humans and often differ from individual to individual, but also across different cultures. Thus, it may be conjectured that some food metaphors are universal, while many others are culturally specific.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis indicates that food is a significant source of metaphorical meanings that pervades our life and language. Since metaphors are grounded in our physical, social, and cultural experiences, metaphorical structures are articulated upon cultural values. Therefore, metaphorical use of language is highly

resourceful as to the various inferences that may be drawn, as illustrated in the present paper.

English language learners ought to be mindful to the fact that metaphor processing requires great complexity of mind processes. This kind of language must be decoded beyond literalness, just as metaphor is to be understood far beyond mere discursive embellishment. Being aware of these aspects, new perspectives may be gained upon the metaphorical expressions often used so thoughtlessly in everyday language. For all these reasons, metaphor appears to be one of the most significant linguistic devices that not only reflect cognitive processes, but also instantiate the cultural context of language users. It is therefore essential to recognize the language of food metaphors as an area of food culture with significant bearing upon the perception of quality.

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