The Semiotics of the Culinary

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Abstract:

Philosophy and the history of thoughts have uncovered novel paths of research to approach the culinary through marriage contracts, church books and judicial texts. They came up with a language analogy applied to food. In other words, by semiotizing food, these researchers, such as Levi-Strauss and Mary Douglass made use of syntax, semantics, pragmatics and rules that govern the language to account of food semiosis. Hence, there is an analogy between language and food in terms of syntax, semantics and collocations. This paper seeks to uncover some crucial aspects of the semiotics of culture, mainly food.

Key words:

Culinary, Sign, Sign system, Semiosis, Text, Language
One cannot sketch out the semiotics of the culinary without revealing its debt towards ethnography, anthropology and sociology. These epistemological fields were the pioneers to invade the food research realm. Nonetheless, history also tackled the concept of food as a revealing agent of the private life and the mindsets. This new discipline has caused an upheaval thanks to the works of “Ecoles des Annales”. Philosophy and history of ideas, besides, have uncovered novel paths of research to approach the culinary through marriage contracts, church books and judicial texts.

Although these disciplines have never declared or acknowledged that they use semiotics, the culinary was considered as a “sign”. In other words, it is a present sign that may divulge/ reveal an absent significance. Thus, the semiotic approach was mainly based on semiotic intuitions of anthropology and history before semiotizing the food.

To tackle the first debt of semiotics towards ethnography and anthropology, we mention some eminent authors who had in-depth reflections on food, through combining their field of research with other disciplines in vogue, such as linguistics, structuralism or psychoanalysis. For instance, Claude Levi-Strauss seems to be the most emblematic figure of this tendency. In addition, he had a profound interest/allure/scrutiny in the culinary.

One of his studies on the culinary significance was Mythologiques III¹ in 1968. He got inspired from Jacobson’s triangles of phonology, vowels and consonants whose angles are related through oppositions. Since food is like the language, which is a set of coherent structures, principles and oppositions, Levi-Strauss used this triangle in his culinary analysis. In his study of the Native Americans’ cuisine, Levi-Strauss states that each corner of the triangle corresponds to a way of cooking: roasted, smoked and boiled. Levi-Strauss’s approach uncovers how the culinary may be treated as a system governed by tools of analysis where opposition plays a crucial role. His culinary triangle has inspired several semioticians; it is as follow:

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Hence, his approach draws a parallelism between culinary data and linguistic ones. Another instance of debt towards anthropology is Mary Douglas who adopted a different, but complementary vista to Levi-Strauss’s. She zeroes in on the rules and regulations that govern the body through dictating the types of food to be consumed. Mary Douglas (1966) studies the diet norms in the Hebrew culture, mainly the forbidden. Hence, the food becomes a sign that expresses a matter beyond its subsistence value. As pastoral people, the Jews give meat an extra signification that transcends the food realm to attain a deal with God and a sense of community. In this respect, food is deemed as a speech act through which the people of Israel express their sense of recognition and belonging. Herein, there is an analogy between language and food in terms of structure (aquatic, air and land habitus) and semantics (the classification of the forbidden food). Her paradigm is mainly based on the binary opposition (pure/impure, death/life) which reflects her structuralism tendency.

Her ideas on the taboos and the forbidden uncover how the culinary code is situated within other codes. In other words, it undergoes other constraints in terms of semantics and logics. This is of a great importance to the semiotician because culture can be depicted as a hierarchy of codes. The code is a regulatory system of associations. It is a filter through which we interpret the world, and give coherence to a set of heterogeneous phenomena. Douglas approach towards food has inspired semiotics since she evolved in her semiotic quest and incorporated the importance of the context.

Another vista in the study of the culinary is history. Jean Louis Flandrin, as a historian, was a pioneer to show how food can be a serious entity for research within the history contours of the culinary sensibilities and demeanors. Flandrin’s ultimate goal is twofold; 1/ to understand what makes sense of food through history, and 2/ to investigate how this meaning changes and metamorphoses through time. His approaches were both quantitative and qualitative. Besides, he dwelt on the culinary as a text in dictionaries, gourmet manuals and cookbooks. His work on the gourmet manuals was significant because it reveals how taste evolved through history. For instance, the taste has degraded between 17th and 19th centuries since the sight was more emphasized than taste.

Although Flandrin is not a semiotician, he contributed a great deal to the culinary semiotics through enriching the meaning of the culinary practice and shedding light on the food corpus and its symptomatology value within a certain historic era’s mindset or sensibilities. The concept of culture of an era is crucial to the semiotics of culture because a culture of an era is determined by a feature, an aspect or a trait. Omar Calabrese (1987) in L’éta neobarocco tackles the notion of a culture’s unity and definability. He concluded that a culture is not unique, but it is complex.

Flandrin’s role was of paramount importance in stressing the value of a food document in determining a culture. For instance, his study about the notion of the salty and the sugary and their usage throughout history was a successful interrogation. Barthes prepared the transition towards a theoretical framework of the semiotics of culture. He used both linguistics and philosophy. Barthes is assumed to pertain to the
French structuralist movement inspired by De Saussure “General linguistics courses” to embark on several projects in linguistics, grammar, semantics and semiology.

Barthes had a great role in accommodating linguistic tools at the service of signs in the society: wine, DS of the 1970s, the Abbes Pierre beard and others in Mythologies, 1957. He also made good use of De Saussure’s linguistics and semiology in other systems than in language. Barthes is more interested in Marxism than in linguistics and semiotics because he aims at denouncing the new myths and deconstructing how they are vehicle through language.

Barthes tackles food, dishes and drinks as signs (a sign system). For instance, wine is a crossroad between ideologies and discourses related to the French universalism anchored in the Enlightenment and the ethics that allow the practice of exclusion and segregation. Wine circulates the discourse of power, such as perfection, collective morale, control and sociability. The same holds true for “Steak, Frittes”. For Barthes, it is a national emblem. It is the main food in society. It has a national value in the movie industry. These examples illustrate that food can be dealt with as a sign system. Barthes’s ideas and semiotic intuitions in Mythologies had a great impact on several linguists and semioticians. His works aimed at establishing tools for a semiology of other sign systems. For instance, in Elements de Semiologie draws the attention to the flexibility of the linguistic categories by De Saussure, such as signifier/signified, langue/parole and connotation/denotation; besides, it tackles the operative value of opposition while studying signs.

One of the semiotic systems was dealt with in one of his works, “Systeme de la mode”, where Barthes distinguishes 3 types of systems: 1/ the technical garment, 2/ the verbal outfit and 3/ the iconic outfit. Each of these systems is governed by its own grammar, lexis and codes. In this book, he dwells on the written outfit. He poses the following inquiry: what happens when a real outfit is subject to or is converted into a speech. Through this work, Barthes paved the road towards a methodology in the semiotic study of other sign systems. His ideas have helped Basso, Grignaffini and Marroni to further reflections on the culinary semiotics or the semiotics of culture and to depart from linguistic or iconic background.

Greimas, on the other hand, could not resist the temptation to adapt the culinary to his analysis model. He gave a short but substantial contribution through his very inspiring but short analysis about the narrative program of “la soupe au piston”. According to Greimas (1983), the narrativity keeps on being representative of a universal meaning and of the culture. In other words, while the narration constructs the culinary object, the semiotics role is to deconstruct the culinary fable.

Likewise, Marrone (2010) insists on the centrality of the text in the culture because this latter is ubiquitous. The text is no longer an empirical object, but rather a notion or a theoretical model. The concept of the text encompasses an internal organization with its rules and organizational principles.

This easing of concepts, such as narration, text, langue, system and others, contributed to the flourishing of interesting studies on food in Italy. For instance, Grignaffini conducted a pertinent semiotic study on wine in 1997 & 1998. His hypothesis postulates that even the mechanism of the recognition and prediction obey the semiotic rules. Afterwards, he extended his findings to an Avant-guard cuisine, namely the conceptual cuisine. While attempting to split up the expression level from the content level of a recipe, Grignaffini
assumes that the expression level is the sensory and perceptual dimension, whereas the content level refers to the social and individual signified. He also states that in the traditional cuisine, the ingredients are mixed and transformed to produce a new entity, while in the Avant-guard cuisine the ingredients are neither mixed nor transformed, such as open ravioli, Steak Tartar and Sashimi (raw Solomon).

In his hypothesis of the pre-semiotic moment wherein the subject get in touch with the object, Grignaffini ventures to reconcile the ideas of two semiotic traditions: the Saussurian which focuses on a sharp formalization and the Peircian that favors a large conception of the sign. This latter devotes a room for reasoning in every semiosis with all possible contextual and historical openings.

Hence, food can be written, seen, taken in pictures or eaten. Each of these approaches comply with a set of rules and their proper semiotics. Through these channels, food is said to be a process of communication between the sender and the receiver.

References


