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## Introduction: Semiotics of food

DOI 10.1515/sem-2016-0095

From an anthropological point of view, food is certainly a primary need: our organism needs to be nourished in order to survive, grow, move, and develop. Nonetheless, this need is highly structured, and it involves substances, practices, habits, and techniques of preparation and consumption that are part of a system of differences in signification (Barthes 1997 [1961]).

Let us consider, for example, the definition of what is edible and what is not. In Cambodia, Vietnam, and many Asian countries people eat larvae, locusts, and other insects. In Peru it is usual to cook hamster and llama's meat. In Africa and Australia it is not uncommon to eat snakes. By contrast, these same habits would probably seem odd, or at least unfamiliar, to European or North American inhabitants. Human beings eat, first of all, to survive. But in the social sphere, food assumes meanings that transcend its basic function and affect perceptions of edibility (Danesi 2004). Every culture selects, within a wide range of products with nutritional capacity, a more or less large quantity destined to become, for such a culture, "food." And even though cultural materialism has explained these processes through functionalist and materialistic theories conceiving them in terms of beneficial adaptations (Harris 1985; Sahlins 1976), most scholars claim that the transformation of natural nutrients into food cannot be reduced to simple utilitarian rationality or availability logics (cf. Fischler 1980, 1990). In fact, this process is part of a classification system (Douglas 1972), so it should be rather referred to a different type of rationality, which is strictly related to symbolic representations. The biological need for nourishment is inserted in systems of values, and, either according to a totemic (Lévi-Strauss 1962), a sacrificial (Détienne and Vernant 1979), a hygienic-rationalist (as in Western dietetics), or an aesthetic (as in gastronomy) logic, all cultures develop a system according to which all products with nutritional capacity are divided into two categories: edible and inedible.

Despite any materialistic claim, therefore, food has progressively emerged as "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior" (Barthes 1997 [1961]: 21), as well as a code expressing cultural identity (Lévi-Strauss 1965; Montanari 2006; Stano 2015a, 2015b). Moreover, in the contemporary "gastromaniac" era (Marrone 2014) a process of

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diffused aestheticization has further enhanced the symbolic and communicative aura surrounding food: local and exotic foods, traditional and innovative food performances, creative and extravagant dishes have permeated TV shows, movies, newspapers, social networks, art exhibitions, and many other spheres of our everyday life. As a consequence, both exaltations and blames of good – or rather bad – tastes have progressively become the keystone of most gastronomic experiences, promoting particular aesthetics and forms of life and evidently resemantizing the food act – that is, deconstructing it in order to rewrite its syntagms and paradigms, as well as its passionate configurations and valorizations (Stano in press).

Hence the need to lay the foundations of a proper *semiotics of food* arises: food is not only a substance for survival and nourishment, but also part of a sign system. Since semiotics deals with signification and communication processes, it can therefore offer effective analytical tools to understand food-related practices, rituals and beliefs (cf. Parasecoli 2011). In fact, analyzing food implies considering several elements: the development of systems of classification in terms of edible or inedible substances, as well as the logics underlying such categorizations and the sociocultural changes affecting them over time; the gustatory perception and its links with both the physiological level and the intersubjective dimension; the concept of commensality and the delicate balance between social roles and subjectivity; table manners; the interpretation of food as a language and the analysis of the processes of translation between different foodspheres; the many languages and forms of communication related to the food universe; food design; and so on and so forth. Despite being mainly neglected by semioticians for years, these topics have been at the center of the analyses of different anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists, historians, linguists, and psychologists. However, since food is a sign expressing sociocultural identity and a system of communication, it has also progressively caught the attention of semiotics: different scholars – such as Barthes (1997 [1961]), Greimas (1983), and Lévi-Strauss (1964, 1966, 1968, 1971) before, and Floch (1995), Boutaud (2004, 2005), Marrone (2001, 2005, 2014, 2015; Marrone and Giannitrapani 2013), Fontanille (2005), and Stano (2015a, 2015b) after – have studied food and taste in order to decipher their grammar (as in the case of structuralists), as well as to analyze the different texts, discourses, and practices related to them. In fact, attention should be paid not only to the *food-material* (i. e., the choice of certain ingredients; the use of “original” foodstuffs versus the adoption of different kinds of “substitutes”; the inclusion of previously unknown or not so common products in local manufacturing and distribution networks), but also and especially to food-related *texts* (i. e., the recipes, the menus, and their inter-cultural variations), *discourses* (i. e., arts, mass media,

literature, and other domains underlying the collective *imaginarium*), and *practices* (making their symbolism explicit and paying particular attention to some aspects such as the spatial dimension, temporality, the use of certain tools, etc.). This immediately recalls the importance of combining different approaches in semiotics, including traditional text semiotics, as well as sociosemiotics, ethno-semiotics, semiotics of culture, and the so-called biosemiotics. The analysis of food-related behaviors recalls various relevant issues in sociosemiotics and ethno-semiotics, such as the tensions underlying the creation of meaning in social practices and intercultural environments (cf. Landowski 1989; Marrone 2001). From the point of view of semiotics of culture, as developed by Lotman (1984, 1990), culinary traditions and practices form part of the semiosphere, the realm within which semiosis exists, recalling specific networks of meanings. Moreover, in the foodsphere cultural meanings supersede the simple dichotomies generally implied to describe and discuss its characteristics (Parasecoli 2011; Caldwell 2004; Wilk 2006), stressing the urgency of reconsidering categories such as global versus local, authentic versus invented, artisanal versus industrial, and so forth. Finally, since food represents a realm of nature characterized by the interaction among the physiological dimension of nutrition, the cultural aspects of signification and communication, and the social structures of production, distribution, and consumption, semiotics of food is also open to biosemiotics (Parasecoli 2011), and it recalls particular dynamics involving the corporeal dimension and the sensory perception (cf. Perullo 2008). Beyond mere matter, the body is a particular and ambivalent type of text that marks at the same time the origin and the limit of signification processes, mediating between subjectivity and cultural identities (Volli 2000). It is significant, therefore, to analyze the way it participates in food-related experiences, paying particular attention to the encounter of different food semiospheres and to the delicate balance between social roles and the expression of the self.

Even if some first attempts have successfully shown the importance of applying semiotics to the analysis of these aspects, there is still much to do (cf. Stano 2015a, 2015b). The current special issue of *Semiotica* attempts precisely to fill this gap, presenting the research of some of the most prominent scholars investigating food-related issues.

Specifically, the first section addresses the problem of the translation (and translatability) of food-related codes and practices. In “The translation of food in literature: A culinary journey through time and genres,” Anthi Wiedenmayer deals with the translation of food lexicon into different languages since the eighteenth century, including various literary genres, such as children’s literature and crime novels. Building on her experience in translation and her previous research on the topic, Wiedenmayer presents some

critical issues related to translation studies at large, afterwards dealing with specific examples on food, and therefore coming to highlight the limits of translatability – that is, the difficulty (sometimes even the impossibility) of rendering specific terms in other languages because of their cultural determination and local referentiality.

Mohamed Bernoussi's "Semiosis of intercultural cooking: The nineteenth century travel literature as a case study" introduces the broader problem of the relation with otherness, highlighting the nihilistic and stereotypical characterization of some examples of colonial literature. Through the analysis of Gabriel Charmes' *Une ambassade au Maroc* (1887) and André Chevillon's *Crépuscule d'Islam* (1906), he aims at highlighting the ideological nature of the foreigner's look on "indigenous" food and cuisine – a recurrent expression in the considered narratives, which is itself often associated with subalternity and lack of civilization, as the author points out—which seems significantly related to a particular poetics of "disgust."

On the other hand, in "The semiotics of migrants' food: Between codes and experience," Sara Greco emphasizes the role of migrants' new experiences abroad in changing local established culinary codes. Combining the Tartu school's cultural macro-approach with the micro-approach of cultural psychology and a model for the analysis of the inferential configuration of arguments, she examines a corpus of interviews to migrating mothers of different origins living in the greater London, in order to show how, in responding to a new experience in a foreign country, individuals generate all sorts of personal adaptations of codes, which may result in a modification of codes themselves.

Simona Stano's "Lost in translation: Food, identity and otherness" deals with the relation between food and cultural identity from a different point of view, describing the processes of translation to which sushi is subjected when it becomes an "ethnic" food – that is, when it is brought from its original food-sphere to other culinary systems. Building on both secondary data and specific case studies, she analyses sushi through a semiotic methodology, also considering the structural differences characterizing some Western-style variations of sushi and their effects of meaning as regards to the eating experience.

The links between food and the processes of construction and the forms of expression of cultural identity are also central to Franciscu Sedda's "Glocal and food: On alimentary translation": after investigating the relation between the idea of farming and the introduction of the term "glocal," the author deals with the appropriation of the foods originating in the Americas within the European semiosphere, and finally considers the alleged aura of "authenticity" surrounding a symbolic dish of Sardinian cuisine (*su porceddu*). Through these steps, Sedda aims to investigate "food glocality," its paradoxical effects

of limitation of food translatability, and the tensions intrinsic to the process of production of authenticity.

This opens the way to some reflections on contemporary foodspheres: in “A note on the meanings of junk food,” Marcel Danesi traces the origins of junk food, showing how its meaning has changed according to a symptomatology inherent in consumerist cultures. Supporting Barthes’s critique of consumerism as a culture of commodification, his analysis efficaciously points out the socio-economic nature of historical meaning structures.

On the other hand, Jesús Contreras Hernandez and Joan Ribas Serra’s “Are nutrients also good to think?” deals with the process of “nutritionalization” that has affected contemporary societies, where food is mostly understood as a collection of biochemical nutrients necessary to achieve the balance needed to live a healthy life. Through the analysis of the medicalized, nutritionalized, and DNA-ified logic characterizing food in contemporary societies, the two scholars investigate the role of the sociocultural dimension in such an alimentary background, finally coming to argue that, definitely, nutrients are also “good to think.”

Massimo Leone’s “Critique of the culinary reason” further widens the perspective of analysis by addressing the meaning of the unprecedented attention devoted to food in contemporary economically developed societies. By means of a provocative treatise rich of accurate examples and references to relevant literature, he questions some recent trends such as Slow Food or Zero Kilometer, as well as the praise of food as ultimate aesthetic experience.

With Gianfranco Marrone’s “Food meaning: From tasty to flavorful” the focus of attention moves to a more theoretical level: building on Greimas’ works, the Italian semiotician introduces the distinction between a “figurative” taste (i. e., the system of meaning arising from sensorial recognition of already known figures of the world) and a “plastic” taste (i. e., the independent sensorial “reasoning,” which works through perceptive processes not depending on existing cognitive schemes, but rather on a direct control on typical sensible qualities of gastronomic substances), therefore investigating the functioning mechanisms of the “aesthetic grasp” of taste.

Similarly, Jean-Jacques Boutaud, in “L’esthétique et l’épiphanique: Traces figuratives de la saveur,” reflects on the process of figurativization of taste, building on several examples to propose a systematization based on the figurative strategies related to different modes of valorization (namely, the synesthetic valorization, the aesthetic valorization, the hyperaesthetic valorization, and the anaesthetic valorization).

In “Taste and meaning,” Ugo Volli also deals with taste, describing it as the habit corresponding to a typological and axiological complex meaning. Building

on the analysis of the set of the dietary rules and interdictions in the Jewish tradition, he offers some relevant considerations on their grammar and semantics, therefore developing the idea of distaste and highlighting the interaction between tastes, values, and meanings.

Alfredo Tenoch Cid Jurado's "The culinary and social-semiotic meaning of food: Spicy meals and their significance in Mexico, Italy, and Texas" then turns to the uses and meanings of *chile* ("chilli") and spicy foods in the Mexican, Texan, and Italian cuisine. Drawing on the observation of some recipes and their narrative structure, the Mexican scholar stresses the role of the cultural and symbolic dimension of food, proficiently relating the material level to the semantic sphere.

José Enrique Finol and Beatriz Pérez, in "Semiotic food, semiotic cooking: The ritual of preparation and consumption of *hallacas* in Venezuela," focus on the practices of preparation and consumption of food. Their accurate ethnographic research on the traditional Venezuelan Christmas dish known as *hallaca* brings them to claim the importance of adopting a ritual and symbolic approach in food-related semiotic analyses.

Finally, the last section draws the attention to the various languages and forms of communication related to the food universe: Eva Navarro Martínez and Alejandro Buitrago Alonso's "Myths, traditions, and rituals of food in Spanish cinema" deals with the cinematographic representation of food, making particular reference to Spanish cinema. Through the analysis of relevant representations of foods and of the act and places of eating in different movies by Luis Buñuel, Pedro Almodóvar, Bigas Luna, and other renowned Spanish directors, they point out how such discourses reflect and promote specific identities, ideologies, gender roles, etc.

In "Starred cosmopolitanism: Celebrity chefs, documentaries, and the circulation of global desire," Fabio Parasecoli also refers to cinematography, analyzing three documentaries (*Three Stars* by Hachmeister, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* by Gelb, and *Step up to Your Plate* by Lacoste) about celebrity chefs with the purpose of showing how media contribute to the formation of a specific *imaginarium* identifying the accomplished, knowledgeable, and male chef trained in established and prestigious food traditions with the culinary ideal.

With Dario Mangano's "Food design chez Bras" the focus of attention moves to food design: through the analysis of Michel Bras' logo and most famous dishes, the Italian scholar attempts to define food design, wondering about its status within the other branches of design and highlighting the role of semiotics in its development and understanding.

Sonja Stummerer and Martin Hablesreiter's "Food design: Symbols of our daily nutrition" focuses on specific food shapes, colors, and recipes, analyzing some

significant examples (e. g., the pretzel, the croissant, the Sacher cake, the Surprise Egg, the plaited bread, etc.) and relating them to specific traditions and myths.

Finally, in “Food-ography: Food and new media,” Patrizia Calefato, Loredana La Fortuna, and Raffaella Scelzi focus on the recent phenomenon of “food photography” and describe it as both a new form of art and an individual practice meant to be a self-expression (i. e., the recently-born phenomenon known as *food porn*). The peculiarity of this form of *foodism* is the viral use of photography through social networks, which – the authors support – stresses the importance of considering new media for the analysis of the meaning of food in contemporary society.

Not only these essays cover different aspects related to food, but they also recall different methodological and theoretical frameworks, ranging from text semiotics to sociosemiotics and semiotics of culture, from ethnographic research to social psychology and argumentation theory, from literature to history and anthropology. On the other hand, they all share a common fundamental purpose: pointing out the capabilities of the semiotic eye to look at the dense and sometimes intricate semantic universe surrounding food in order to decipher its fundamental logics and functioning mechanisms. Without claiming to be comprehensive or complete, the present collection is intended to lay the foundations for a proper semiotics of food, hoping that it will be further “nourished” and developed by future research.

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