

Giuliana Garzone

Commentary article

### **Food, Culture, Language and Translation**

The article I have been asked to comment upon is essentially aimed at discussing the relationship between food, culture, language and translation, relying on examples from some works by postcolonial women writers (among them in particular Gloria Anzaldúa, Esmeralda Santiago, Chimamanda Adichie, Najat El Hachmi), in a Cultural Discourse Studies perspective (Shi-xu 2015) also drawing on postcolonial translation studies (Bassnett 2013).

The conceptual frame in which the article is set rests on the assumption that food and eating are not only part of the biological processes aimed at sustenance, but comprise a set of products and actions that reflect culture, values, identities, ethnicities, and religions, and works as a system of communication. This premise is discussed with reference to the very rich literature on food produced mainly in semiotics, philosophy, geography, literature, sociology, economics, etc. and also in the light of ongoing research projects in translation studies aimed at exploring the relationship between food and translation.

What is especially interesting is the fact that the authors use the condition of women living in post-colonial and migration settings, positioned as they are “between” two cultures and two languages as a magnifying lens to highlight the strong cultural connotation of food and food words as carriers of symbolic meanings: they qualify as essential elements for the construction of self-identity and the definition of a person’s, a community’s or a social group’s identity, social collocation, and ethnicity. In Vidal and Faber’s article this theme is connected with that of the meaning and value of translation in a post-colonial context.

### **Linguistic aspects**

The request to comment on this article has been especially welcome to me, as the relationship between food, culture, language, and translation was central to my research for a few years as I was among the co-ordinators of a project entitled “Words for food” (2011-2016) (cf. Garzone 2015) aimed at exploring the value, meaning and linguistic designation of food in different languages and cultures. The project, occasioned by Milan Expo 2015 whose theme – as is well known – was “Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life”, provided an excellent opportunity to reflect on the value and significance of words for food at a time when in developed countries discourses on food are proliferating especially in the media and in entertainment contexts (e.g. in TV programmes, food blogs, chef demonstrations, recipe books, etc). In the project, a wide range of different aspects related to food discourses, food cultures, food production, distribution and safety, and to scientific research in the biotech and agro-food sector were explored, but attention was also given to the political significance of food. Especially topical in this respect is the *Milan Charter* (<http://carta.milano.it/en/> [20/07/2017]), a document in 19 languages launched during Expo 2015 as a counterpart to the essentially commercial focus of the event, to assert the idea that the right to food is a fundamental human right, and to advocate the commitment of local, national and international institutions and businesses, as well as civil society and individual citizens, to overcome the major challenges related to food: combating undernutrition,

malnutrition and waste, promoting equitable access to natural resources and ensuring sustainable management of production processes.

Within the framework of the “Words for Food” project, research was conducted on nine languages and the cultures connected to them, and food-and-nutrition related issues were investigated from various viewpoints – linguistic, discursive, sociological, anthropological, semiotic, technological, geographic, etc.

The results of the research effort are set out in a recently published volume *Parole per mangiare: discorsi e culture del cibo* [Words for Food: Food Discourses and Cultures; cf. Bajini et al. 2017], which collects essays characterised by a marked interdisciplinary approach applying a variety of analytical tools from different methodological perspectives – from lexicography to discourse analysis, from semiotics to cultural studies – with a focus on a range of different geographical and cultural areas.

The project also generated two ‘spin-off’ publications with a practical focus: an electronic terminological database in nine languages (Santos López et al. 2015) and a Dictionary of nutrition in Italian, English and Chinese (Garzone et al. 2015), comprising “words for food” in the three languages involved, using Italian as the hub language. This trilingual Dictionary was compiled mainly by extracting terminology from three huge comparable corpora of authentic texts dealing with food and nutrition in the relevant languages. The process of linguistic mapping of this semantic area performed with a view to corpus compilation and analysis, performed in parallel on each corpus, contributed to bringing to the fore correspondences across languages, in many cases making it possible to identify terms that were translations of each other. But in many other cases the procedure had the main effect of laying bare profound differences in how cultures categorise food products as well as actions and tools in food preparation.

The causes for such divergences in categorization are manifold, being due to a whole range of factors, first and foremost material in nature being strictly related to variations in communities’ living conditions: history, territory, climate, social organisation, need for and capability of food preservation, technology availability, etc (cf. Montanari 2004/2006). Furthermore, the symbolic value attributed to foods and to procedures and rituals involved in their preparation and consumption is part of the picture, being also strictly associated with taboos or other socially dictated rules concerning food consumption (Meigs 1987), providing evidence as to the degree to which the conceptualisation of food is the result of a cultural construction.

Obviously, there are kinds of food that are not used at all in certain cultures, so in those cultures a denomination for them is missing altogether; and there are groups of similar products (e.g. vegetables belonging to the same species, but to different sub-species) that in some cases are categorised as one single product and designated by means of one word, but in others are subject to more or less subtle distinctions and categorized as different products, for which various denominations are used, often subject to local variations. Similarly, in the case of cuts of meat, the ways animals are dissected are different even in different areas of the same country, with obviously different denominations or, in some case, the same denomination designating different cuts. This applies also to food preparation techniques, equipments and utensils and, all the more so, to processed food and culinary preparations. Differences in categorization across languages do not regard only kinds of foodstuffs and food preparation utensils and techniques, but even the way food and beverages are perceived (and described) by means of sensory terminology. This is an issue that has recently come to the attention of terminologists, having emerged more prominently in food and beverage quality evaluations, which aim to standardize and harmonize the way food and its characteristics are described for the benefit of consumers and experts in the food industry (cf. Temmerman 2017).

In particular, terminologists have started to give attention to how the sensory experiences of eating and drinking are conveyed through language. Since human experience is subjective and undifferentiated, and flows into the “shapeless and indistinct mass” of thought (de Saussure 1922/2011: 111), notions are delineated and ideas made distinct only thanks to the categorizations introduced by language. Thus, it is inevitable that language shapes our perception and tasting of food. As Temmerman (2017: 162) makes clear: “As human cognition is embodied [i.e. based on experience acquired through the physical body], we are interacting with the world through the intermediary of the senses. But our sensory experience needs to be captured in linguistic expressions if we want to be able to understand and communicate about our findings”.

Therefore, since such linguistic expressions differ across languages and cultures, our expectations when tasting food will be to some extent determined not only by previous experience, but also by the “words” we have learnt to use for the purpose of describing it.

This affects all aspects of our relationship with food, and in particular the choice of words to indicate the taste, shape and texture and adjectives to express appreciation or aversion for it, which may vary greatly across languages.

### **Food, culture and translation**

On account of the observations above, the translation of food and food-related words appears to pose very difficult, even apparently unsurmountable, problems. But in line of principle translating words for food is always possible. As Jakobson made clear in his seminal essay *On Linguistic Aspects of translation* (1959), “All cognitive experience and its classification is conveyable in any existing language. Whenever there is deficiency, terminology may be qualified and amplified by loan-words or loan-translations, neologisms or semantic shifts, and finally, by circumlocutions.” (Jakobson 1959: 234)

My experience with the compilation of the *Dictionary of Food and Nutrition* (2015) is that recourse had to be made to all those procedures, especially for the translation into Chinese on account of profound cultural differences with the other two languages involved. However, not one single word or expression turned out to be so problematic as to be left untranslated. (Garzone 2017)

But apart from finding the right translation for words or expressions, there are often caveats to be taken into account in the translation process. For instance, even when a correspondence between two code units across languages is found, there could be a problem regarding their linguistic value in the respective languages ((de Saussure 1922/2011: 112-114). In this respect, in the same essay, Jakobson (1959) uses as an example the denomination of a very common food product, i.e. cheese. “The English word ‘cheese’ cannot be completely identified with its standard Russian heteronym “сыр,” because cottage cheese is a cheese but not a сыр. Russians say: ‘Принеси сыру и творогу’ (‘bring cheese and [sic] cottage cheese.’) In standard Russian, the food made of pressed curds is called сыр only if ferment is used.” (Jakobson 1959: 233) In other words, although it is true that the English word “cheese” can be seen as the translation of “сыр”, it is also true that ‘сыр’ shares the semantic area covered in English by “cheese” with the word “творог”. Therefore, there could be cases where translating “cheese” with “сыр” is either imprecise (e.g. when the English word designates in general cheese and cottage cheese, and this matters for the sake of the overall meaning of the text) or utterly wrong (when the food referred to is cottage cheese, excluding all kinds of fermented cheese). This requires that the translator considers whether the difference in linguistic value is relevant in the context where the code unit to be translated is set, and if it is, s/he uses an explanatory procedure to reproduce the message of the source text correctly.

Another factor to be considered is the social value attributed to certain kinds of food within a given culture, in absolute terms (for instance, *pasta* in Italy or *soup à l'oignon* in France) or in connection with festivities or special events (e.g. eating turkey on Thanksgiving Day in the US, or *jiaozi* 饺子 for the Spring Festival in China [Chunjie 春节]). In translation, of course, it is possible to render the words or expressions involved, but the cultural and symbolic value of eating a certain kind of food in certain circumstances, or at all, will inevitably go lost. Furthermore, consideration has to be given to the connotative/emotional value associated with certain kinds of food in the individual's experience, where the social value attributed to it is compounded by the psychological significance the food takes on for having been eaten at certain moments in life and being associated with them (the "*petites madeleines* effect"). Thus, the association of food with a given culture and with the life of social groups and ethnicities takes on a connotation, a meaningfulness that goes beyond social rules and conventions, and becomes part of people's personal and ethnic identities. This aspect has crucial importance when cultures are confronted in situations of migration or colonization, especially in case of asymmetry.

The preservation of eating habits and culinary traditions is a very important and effective anthropological tool available to those who feel their identity is threatened in its very existence because of power asymmetry, as in (post-)colonial settings, or because of integration and assimilation, as in immigration contexts, a tool which is effective in itself for the maintenance of tradition if used for an affirmative action, but also a powerful instrument that constitutes a semiotic system, a system of communication.

As Roland Barthes made clear as far back as the 1960s:

For what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior. [...] When he buys an item of food, consumes it, or serves it, modern man does not manipulate a simple object in a purely transitive fashion; this item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies. (Barthes 1961/2013: 24)

Douglas went a step forward: "If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries. [...] Food categories therefore encode social events. (Douglas 1999: 231).

Food choices are indicators of status, but also of social or religious belonging, as often within a given culture certain kinds of foods are prescribed or proscribed to different categories of persons, so that "what you will eat and what you will not eat is a social barrier almost as powerful as the incest taboo" (Meigs 1987: 342). More in general food habits constitute traditions and are associated with national, regional and ethnic groups, so they become distinctive elements for such groups. Quite obviously, a translator cannot ignore this order of signification of food, and in each specific case will find the best solutions to make the target readers aware of it or provide them with the necessary background information.

In particular, the identity value of food becomes salient in contexts where a certain system or tradition comes into contact with other systems. As Barthes points out (1961/1998: 25): "Substances, techniques of preparation, habits, all become part of a *system of differences in signification*; and as soon as this happens, we have communication by way of food." (emphasis added). Steiner expresses a similar notion when he asserts that "to experience difference is to re-experience identity", and that "'Otherness', particularly when it has the wealth and penetration of language, compels 'presentness'"

to stand clear” because “one’s own space is mapped by what lies outside; it derives coherence, tactile configuration, from the pressure of the external” (Steiner 1995/1998: 381).

Therefore these aspects are especially meaningful in the post-colonial and migration contexts where individuals bring with them their own culture and identity, and maintain them in an environment where they live “in a language that is not their own” (Deleuze & Guattari (1975/1986), and their own language has the status of a minor language, which constructs a minor literature.

In the novels examined in Vidal and Faber’s article, through food women affirm “their otherness and their feeling of belonging to a minor community.” The naming of food and food preparation offer them a way to re-claim their identity and re-assert their values, their mentality, their approach to life. These women, and the women writers who created them, inhabit a third space, “a space in-between” (Bhaba 1994: 55) and their identities are “double, plural, heteroglossic, and heteropic”, as the authors point out. Because of their experience of migration, they are “translated persons”, to use Rushdie’s famous expression (Rushdie 1991: 17). As Bhaba points out, “migrant experience is no less a transitional phenomenon than a translational one” (1994: 224) given that the two conditions, transfer and translation, are “ambivalently enjoined in the ‘survival’ of the migrant”. Thus when “borderline” individuals use the language of the country where they live, the language into which they are “translated”, they usually leave some scope for their original language, choosing to maintain untranslated some specific aspects of their original culture as well as objects and procedures. As Vidal and Faber point out, in the case of the women writers discussed in their article this happens consistently with food and food-related words, which are simply used in their original form applying the process that Newmark (1987: 81-82) calls “transference”, which in terms of material procedure coincides with the process defined “borrowing” in linguistics. This is done as an important affirmative action that – as Bhaba (1994: 224) points out quoting from Benjamin (1955/2007: 75) – “dramatizes the activity of culture’s untranslatability”. The decision not to translate words for food has a complex meaning: it is a form of resistance to the consistent and exclusive use of the language of the colonizer; it is a claim of identity against the risk of assimilation inherent in integration; it embodies the migrants’ attachment to, and nostalgia for, their original culture. And this is all the more meaningful as this decision is discussed in a translation perspective although in actual fact the novels considered are not in themselves translations, but they are written in the language of the colonizer into which their authors “translate” themselves and their experiences and views.

If, as Steiner (1975/1998: 380) argues, translation involves a paradoxically altruistic element, since translators help others in an operation no longer necessary or immediate for themselves on account of their bilingualism and biculturalism, at the same time it also involves a selfish, proprietary impulse to preserve intact the object to be translated: in the case examined here the authors follow this proprietary impulse when dealing with words for food and choose not to provide a translation, opting for transference instead. And it is all the more meaningful that this resistance to assimilation that is enacted through failure to translate should regard in particular food-related words. Every person’s relationship to food is so profoundly ingrained in their psychology, and so intimately connected with identity, memory and traditions that food words do not easily lend themselves to translation, and at the same time they are admirably suitable for assertion of identity.

### **Final remarks**

The refusal to translate words for food is a meaningful stance, subtracting food related words and notions from the cultural hegemony of the mainstream language, preserving them in their original form. In this case, in linguistic terms, transference can be seen as a form of redress by individuals

who have had to foresake so much of themselves and their original identity in order to live in a foreign country, or in a colonized environment.

Using foreign words, incorporating them, assimilating them, is a very normal process in the functioning of any language: interference is one of the main mechanisms that promote the development and renewal of language systems. Every language is inherently impure, a sort of harlequin, a patchwork made up of elements whose origins can be traced back to other idioms, ancient and modern: think of English, with its wealth of words originally borrowed from Latin, Danish, French, German, Urdu, Arabic, etc ... But it is important to make a distinction between the use of foreign words resulting from “interference”, usually brought about by the prestige of the lending language – a mechanism that goes under the denomination of “borrowing” – and “transference”, i.e. the deliberate choice by a translator to refrain from translating a word or an expression. In the former case, borrowing is the first step in a process of assimilation: in the case of words for food one may think of the innumerable denominations that have been borrowed and integrated into a number of languages and are now only remotely associated (if at all) with the countries they originated from (e.g. pizza, kabob, sushi). In the case of transference, considering the fact that – as discussed above with reference to Jakobson’s theory – anything deriving from cognitive experience can be translated into any existing language, the maintenance of words for food in the original language represents a sort of affirmative action, the deliberate and provocative assertion of one’s identity and the refusal to give up every fiber of one’s being, surrendering it to the recipient language and culture.

All these reflections on food, language, culture and translation provide evidence of the crucial importance of language in the categorization and communication of material, psychological, cultural and social experience. Language is not only a medium utilized instrumentally to *transmit* information, but rather a mode social actors use to *categorize* experience and *construct* frames of reference to be used for communication which can never be culturally neutral. Translation, as a language-based activity, is a powerful instrument in the encounter between languages and cultures, an instrument of interpenetration or confrontation, which favours dialogue and exchanges, but at the same time may also give rise to tensions and contrasts between cultures. By the same token, non-translation can be a powerful instrument of identity-assertion and cultural affirmation.

Vidal and Faber’s study shows how effective language and translation can be in contrasting what Shi-xu (2016: 2) calls the “ubiquitous cultural imperialism emanating from the Global Centres”, and in rejecting the total assimilation of marginal and weaker cultures into major mainstream Western cultures. In this respect it contributes to a strand of research in CDS that focuses on cultural diversity, advocating cultural co-existence rather than assimilation, cultural complexity rather than universalizing Westcentred conformity.

#### **Notes on contributor**

GIULIANA GARZONE is Full Professor of English, Linguistics and Translation at the Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy, where she co-ordinates the PhD programme in Linguistic, Literary and Intercultural Studies. Her research interests are mainly in ESP, which she has explored in a discourse analytical perspective, integrating it with corpus linguistics, and in translation and interpreting studies. She has co-ordinated several research projects and published extensively on legal, scientific and business discourse as well as on translation and interpreting. Her latest publications include the volume *Le traduzioni come ‘fuzzy set’. Percorsi teorici e applicativi (Translations as a ‘fuzzy set’. Theory and applications)* (LED Edizioni, 2015), and the book chapters “Persuasive Strategies on Surrogacy Websites: A Discourse-Analytical and Rhetorical Study” (2017), “Polyphony and Dialogism in Legal Discourse: Focus on Syntactic Negation” (2016) and “Professional Groups on Social Networking Sites: The Case of Arbitration Professionals”. (2016).

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