

Traces of Cannibalistic Instinct in Food Denomination

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ABSTRACT

Drawing attention to the associations evoked in the process of food denomination, the paper attempts to reveal the traces of cannibalistic instinct in this realm. By singling out some of the principal ways used in the semantic reticulum to name food, special attention is devoted to those names that allude to particular categories of enemies (devoured as wholes or as parts of the body). What is referred to as »anti-taboo« shows how the linguistic and more generally the anthropological 'substitution process' is a human reaction to the persistence of the cannibalistic taboo in the face of the belief that cannibalism is an impulse far removed from modern society. Finally it is noted that cannibalistic metaphors have been analysed in other fields, whereas in the area of food denomination they have been neglected. The suggestion is that the reason for such neglect may lie in an attempt to conceal our closeness to the cannibalistic instinct in the form of linguistic substitution.

Key words: food denomination, cannibalism, anti-taboo theory, metaphor

Introduction

In historical linguistics, from the semantic as from the psychological point of view, the question of analyzing food denomination has only very recently gained scientific interest. We are now trying to shed light on the associations evoked while denominating food, from the simplest – what Lévi Strauss calls »raw food«¹ – such as honey – onto cooked food, up to the most sophisticated dishes.

We can single out some principal ways of food denomination in the semantic *reticulum*; the name comes:

- a) from its main element: e.g. in Italian *risotto* (from *riso* »rice«), *castagnaccio* (sweet made from *castagna* »chestnut«);
- b) from the way of cooking, transforming a simple substance: e.g. *les frites*, for

- fried potatoes, *roast*, *roti*, *arrosto* for roasted meat;
- c) from the shape: e.g. in Italian pastas: *quadrucci* (from *quadrato* »square«), *scacchi* (from *scacco* »chess squares«);
- d) from the flavour (which is strangely not the most frequent) *salatini* (»salted cocktail biscuits« from *sale* »salt«), *amaretti* biscuits (from *amaro* »bitter«), *bitter* (a drink in Italy, a kind of beer in the U.K.);
- e) from the place of origin, frequent for wines and spirits, e.g. *Cognac*, *Bourgogne*, *Scotch*, but not only: *Vichyssoise* (a French soup), *Béarnaise* (a sauce);
- f) from the name of the inventor or of a very important consumer e.g. *Margherita*, the pizza dedicated to Queen Margherita, and amongst the meat dishes, *Chateaubriand* or *Bismark*;
- g) from particular qualities: e.g. *eau-de-vie*, *acquavite* etc, *sauce ravigote* (from *ravigoter* »reinvigorate«) and, for example, colourful Italian expressions such as *tiramisu* »pick me up« or *salimbocca* »jump in the mouth« (little meat-rolls), or the Turkish *Imam bayildi* »the Imam fainted« (when eating the extraordinary eggplant recipe).

Moreover food is, beyond any doubt, also a very important sphere of attraction, attracting the use of expressions from other spheres by means of metaphors (mainly based on similarity), which implies of course a *tertium comparationis*: in English we often find this happening for sweets, such as *White Mountain*, *Chiffon Pie*, *Floating Islands/Ile Flottante*; in French we also find for example *sauce mousseline* »muslin sauce«, in Italian *arancini* »little oranges« (in practice rice balls) and many kinds of pasta, such as *farfalle* »butterflies« or *stelline* »little stars«, etc.

I will now draw your attention to a well-known phenomenon that can influ-

ence the choice, transformation or substitution of names, in this as in other fields: I am talking about linguistic taboo.

Linguistic Taboo Issue

It is not my intention to go into the important question of food taboo, I will only stress the fact that in many cases there is a coincidence between taboo in eating and taboo in naming, as in the case of the Roman Flamens who could neither eat nor mention raw meat or goats²; or in the case of devout Jews who avoid mentioning the forbidden pork, substituting a vague term or the Hebrew name for it, *hazir*; or, in our own case, calling a mortiferous substance *poison* in English and *poison* in French, coming from the original term *boisson* »something to drink«. On the other hand we see that most precious or vital food can be the object of a linguistic taboo: you cannot mention butter in some places in Russia, in the Caucasus, or among the Jakutis, you cannot mention fish in the Jewish milieu of Jabes (Tunisia) and their substitute names are very picturesque. Clearly, in the first case the taboo is directly caused by fear, in the second case it comes from the need for protection. These are the usual mechanisms of linguistic taboo.

In some cases we find a very singular reaction to the taboo: the very name of the forbidden or dangerous food is given to another food, in some way similar but absolutely different in terms of substance. For instance in Italy, where the Catholic ban on eating meat on Fridays was respected until recently, we have some vegetarian dishes which were named after the *cappone* »capon«, which yields a very fat and singularly rich meat, thus we have *caponata* in Sicily and *cappone magro* in Genoa. In a similar way, *hazirat*³, being made of different kinds of meat in the Jewish tradition, takes only the name of the forbidden pork, but does not con-

tain any. *Liquore Veleno* »poison liquor« in Sardinia, has taken the terrible name of poison, obviously without its mortal consequences.

I call these cases examples of *anti-taboo* and I will return to the question later. However, I mentioned them now, because I believe this could be the right background for understanding the issue of cannibalistic expressions in food denomination.

The ban on cannibalism seems so absolute and far removed from us in time or space, as to be unnecessary and we feel no shock when cannibalistic names are given to absolutely innocuous dishes, mainly sweets, for which there is generally more space for fantasy in denomination.

Let us come to some examples, which can be divided in two classes: on the one hand the names that point to a total devouring of the enemy, and on the other hand those that point to an important part of his body (we should remember that the cannibalistic aim is not only revenge, ultimate victory, but also the mastering of the enemy's particular strength, usually considered as being concentrated in a particular body part⁴). Thus, for the first category we find that in Naples pieces of fried dough, usually ring-shaped fritters, are called *frati fritti* »fried monks«. Strangely enough, we find the same expression – *galaxim pfrit* – for unidentified sweets in a 16th century Yiddish text, written in Italy⁶; in Livorno we find the same name reduced as *frati* and used also in this case for ring-shaped fritters, there is also a professional *frataio* »fritter man« to sell them. The idea that a monk can be an enemy to be devoured is not so shocking if we consider it against the background of a certain Italian anticlericalism. To remain in the same field

we find, for instance, some types of pasta, whose names add proof to the argument, such as *strozzapreti* (Florence), *strangolapreti* and *strangolaprieviti* (Campania) or *strangugliaprieviti* (Calabria), all meaning »choke the priest!«⁷; in Tuscany this type of pasta is halter shaped. In everyday language, expressions like the Italian *mangiapreti* »priest-eater« which are used to mean »anticlerical« can be explained only in terms of the same cannibalistic background.

To conclude, *frati fritti*, our introductory example, allows me a little digression on ways of cooking incorporated into cannibalistic expressions. Amongst these we find frying, which often recurs in Italian expressions such as *siamo fritti* »we are fried« meaning »we are finished«, *te lo raccomando fritto* »he may be recommended only fried«. But perhaps being roasted or grilled is more final. In fact we have, in many languages, the saying »to fall from the frying pan into the fire«, and we can also quote Indian culture: in the Laws of Manu (VII, 26), it is written »...Without just punishments, the stronger would roast the weaker like a fish on the spit«.

Before passing on to another category of enemies we can also quote *la religieuse* »the nun«, a sweet from Strasbourg that looks like a plump nun. Although I believe everything regarding nuns, in this field, has a more complex origin, where we can trace an erotic-desecrating function, (maybe similar to what we find in sacrificial ceremonies relating to virgins) nonetheless, the presence, in the same milieu of *les sacristains** »sacristans« – thin twisted biscuits – allows us to include this example in the category of enemies devoured⁸.

Very often the source of such a violent aggressive instinct as the cannibalistic one can be found in racial hate, which is

* For most examples of French sweets my main source has been the same throughout the whole text.

frequently racial fear. In Italian, for instance, some expressions can clearly be traced back to the Italian colonial experiences of the last hundred years. We find an impressive variety of sweets, mostly covered with chocolate, that bear unequivocal names: *Assabesi*, *Moretti*, *Moretto candies*. Certainly *Meneliks* and maybe in English, the name *Negus in quantity* (given to a dark beverage) has the same origins.

It seems to me that nowadays the phenomenon has been renewed by fear of a multiethnic society. I happened to ask in a Milanese bar what a *marocchino* »Moroccan« (a sort of little cappuccino served in an espresso cup) was, and the embarrassed answer was: »It is an espresso with some cocoa on it, I hope nobody will take it as an offence.« Moreover, we can find here (in *Negus in quantity* and in *Marocchino*) examples of cannibalistic drinking instead of eating. We can observe the same phenomenon in sports slang: we hear *me lo bevo* »I am going to drink him« (said about an antagonist that will surely be defeated). (A more »classical« example in sports slang: before a recent football-match against Wales, a banner bore the words *Galles allo spiedo*, »Wales on the spit!«). Another category of very dangerous enemies can be policemen: so, in Brasil we have chocolates called *brigadeiros* »policemen« (it is also necessary to remember that brigadiers are always dressed in black).

A very interesting example is that of the *policier ficelé* »the trussed policeman«, a name given in Tunis to a piece of meat, very well trussed, prepared to be roasted: in this case the sarcasm adds a lot to the imagery of devouring the dangerous enemy. Another example for this category can be the *Garibaldini* »soldiers of Garibaldi«, a sort of pasta for which I

have unfortunately only the name, but not a description, used in Southern Italy after the victorious expedition of Garibaldi's Mille, the results of which were not unanimously accepted by the local people. Our last example for this group is the sweet called *Om Ali* »Ali's mother«. Calif Ali's mother was a rebel and thrown through a window after which her breasts were amputated. The sweet looks crumpled and is soaked in milk.

We shall now come to our second group of expressions, those relating to one single part of the enemy's body, and we will start here as well with a very clear example. *Haman's ears* are fritters eaten in the Jewish tradition of Purim, a festival that celebrates salvation and victory over Haman, a terrible enemy of the Jewish people (details can be found in the biblical book of Esther). Ears are a very important part of the enemy's body, as a symbol of alertness and cleverness, but we also find minor references to other parts of Haman's body in sweets such as *I denti di Haman* »Haman's teeth«, *Gli Occhi di Haman* »Haman's eyes«, and, in the Ashkenazy milieu, *Haman taschen* that, according to the Jewish folklore scholar Galit Hazan Rokem*, are not »Haman's pockets« but, according to a secondary meaning found in other Germanic languages, »Haman's testicles«. We have rich contemporary evidence for the cannibalistic use of an enemy's ears and eyes, also for testicles devoured mainly to be sure that the reproductory faculties will be annihilated⁹.

The important racial motivation which has been mentioned is certainly the source of the name of a sweet that occurs in English, Italian, French and German (I cannot yet assert that there is a single origin or whether there has been parallel creation) which is: *Moor's head*,

* G. H. Rokem's generous contribution was made informally, through conversations.

*Mohrenkopf*¹⁰, *Tete de Nègre*⁸, *Testa di Moro*; these are names given, in different countries, to a mound-shaped chocolate cake (or chocolate covered cake) with a soft center.

It is hardly necessary to stress the importance of the head in cannibalism and the same can be said about the heart: in French, again with racial motivation, we find the name, *coeur de negre* »Negro's heart«, once more for a sweet (this time heart-shaped) covered with chocolate*. A very special example is, in my view, in Tunisian Jewish language, the name of a dish made of beef tongue and brain. The name is *abukatu*, from Italian *avvocato* »lawyer«¹². Clearly enough, the lawyer is an enemy whose strength resides in the brain and the tongue. Besides, it is important to remember that these two body parts are crucial anthropophagical objects: for the tongue, we can quote Strabo on the Indus valley, for both we have modern evidence in Guinea. For the brain we have the striking and very rich evidence studied by Blanc¹³ of stone-age skulls revealing the extraction of brains for ritual anthropophagy.

At the other extreme in every sense, we have in Brazil *pé de mulec* »bag snatcher's foot«, a sweet made of caramelized peanuts, named after the dark feet of very young and quick Brazilian bag snatchers. As in the case of *abukato*, the name refers to the most dangerous part of the body, whose qualities enable the enemy to win.

Two kinds of sweets eaten in Venice at the beginning of November, on the days of the commemoration of the Dead, namely *ossi dei morti* »bones of the dead« which

we find also in Emilia, Calabria¹⁴, Puglia**, and Sicily and *fave dei morti* »broad beans of the dead«, introduce us to the field of cannibalism of the dead: we cannot go into the very rich horrifying evidence of the true origin of funeral banquets¹⁴, keeping their original nature in Africa until very recently: we will only draw attention to the fact that the fear of the deceased's possible return and the eagerness to master their qualities or their strength can, once more, explain the phenomenon***. Bones »ossa« symbolize strength, and dead bones are believed to give sacred-magical strength. Broad beans »fave«, according to ancient traditions, were supposed to contain the deceased's souls and this explains the Venetian names¹⁴.

Conclusion

To sum up, the evidence I have quoted obviously shows traces of my personal linguistic experiences, and could certainly be enriched by other cultural milieus; in any case it enables us to conclude that in gastronomical denomination a force which is the reaction to taboo can direct and define the choice of a metaphorical expression, in the *reticulum semanticum*. Otherwise why, if fritters look like ears, should they be called Haman's ears? Why should chocolate sweets, that could be named according to their color, for instance brownies, take so many names recalling colored persons?

From the linguistic point of view we can try to offer different explanations. We have the necessity of using the name of a forbidden, dangerous food for an innocuous one: the same, in a certain way, that

* Evidence of the cannibalistic importance of the enemy's heart ranges from the historical examples of the Night of the Huguenots to the Aztec sacrifices¹¹.

** For Puglia, Santorio writes about "...little sweets that look like bones, skeletons and skulls..."¹⁵.

*** Besides the information I got from Scilla Gorla's contribution, for other cultures I got reference again from Sanday¹¹.

we have seen for *caponata*, *hazirata*, and *Liquore Veleno*. These cases of what I call *anti-taboo* in the gastronomical field, can all be seen in the context of a more general and rooted phenomenon of *anti-taboo*: that of forbidden names and expressions metaphorically transferred in different situations; for instance this happens in most languages to the names for sexual parts or activities¹⁶.

These names and expressions can also be de-semanticized and reduced to mere emotion-signs (as happens to sacred names reduced to interjections, or to the fearful words linked to death, that are normally avoided, but used in Italian as a mere superlative, e.g. *bello da morire* »killingly beautiful« (which means »very beautiful«), or *più bello di così si muore* (»more beautiful than that you die«).

From the anthropological point of view we could assume a substitution process in function, that can be compared to what happens in the sacrificial field, where in the case of divine cannibalism (that requires human victims) we witness the substitution of animals for human beings^{11*}.

Going back to cannibalistic gastronomical expressions, I should like to emphasize one last point. Let us consider other spheres: the presence of cannibalistic metaphorical expressions has been noticed and studied in many cases. We find a beautiful example in Phillips's study '*Cannibalism qua capitalism*'¹⁷. It seems odd that the presence of cannibalistic expressions in the gastronomical field, which is so intimately related to it (dare we say the same?) has not yet been noticed.

It may be that we are once again facing a taboo reaction, aimed at concealing the strong link existing between a cannibalistic object and its image (not a symbol, or a metaphor, as, for instance, in the case of capitalism). Perhaps this reaction aims to conceal the belief, the very deep unconscious desire for, or intention to carry out, a magical performance, not dissimilar to the one we have in the *defixiones* phenomenon or in the Renaissance period with wax figures pierced with a view to killing the person represented.

Thus it may be possible to return to what has been said previously and ask ourselves: is cannibalism really »so far removed from us in time or space«?

On the one hand side we witness discussions of the historical reality of cannibalistic evidence in the modern age; on the other hand, we see that it is becoming a very frequent subject, in movies for instance^{**}. Here we may be experiencing two different faces of the same phenomenon. Moreover language, with its ancient stratification, but also with its modern creations, gives us very strong evidence for this, as shown in the examples I have given.

It is clear that in this case, perhaps more than in others, a linguist needs the help of other researchers in order to better understand the linguistic facts in the framework of such a complex and widely discussed phenomenon as cannibalism.

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For the items analyzed, when I do not give specific quotations, it means they are of public dominion or that they are due to

* Another important example can be found in the Bible, when Abraham is first offered to sacrifice his own son Isaac, but later he is interrupted, and provided with a ram in substitution for it (Gen., 22, 1–19).

** In recent times, for instance "Hannibal the Cannibal", or Peter Greenaway's "The Cook, His Wife, and Her Lover" (1985).

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TRAGOVİ KANİBALISTIČKOG INSTINKTA U PREHRAMBENOM NAZIVLJU

SAŽETAK

U članku se analiziraju tragovi kanibalističkog instinkta kroz asocijacije koje se javljaju u prehrambenom nazivlju. Izdvajajući neke od glavnih načina imenovanja hrane u mreži semantičkog nazivlja, posebna je pozornost posvećena onim nazivima koji asociraju na određene kategorije neprijatelja (koje se proždimalo čitave ili u dijelovima). Ono o čemu se govori kao o antitabuu pokazuje kako je jezični ili općenitije antropološki proces supstitucije ljudska reakcija na ustrajnost kanibalističkog tabua s uvjerenjem da je kanibalizam davno iskorijenjen iz modernog društva. Naposljetku se primjećuje da su kanibalističke metafore analizirane u drugim disciplinama, dok su u prehrambenom nazivlju uporno bile zanemarivane. Jedan od mogućih razloga za takvo zanemarivanje možda leži i u pokušaju da se putem jezične supstitucije prikrije ukorijenjenost kanibaliskog instinkta u nama samima.