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Culinary knowledge:

Polysemy and the poetics of metaphor constructing the everyday experience in a Cretan town

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Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

Culinary knowledge:
Polysemy and the poetics of metaphor
constructing the everyday experience in a Cretan town

Abstract:

In this article the culinary realm is approached as experience instantiated through discourse. Ethnographic material from Neapolis of Eastern Crete is used in order to account for the polysemy of food experience. The realm of food is used metaphorically in order to describe and organise everyday experience. Bread, in particular, as a core foodstuff is employed in the local discourse in order to articulate a variety of meanings. Finally food as a synesthetic experience proves a cultural mechanism for constructing social relations, statuses or gendered identities. Indigenous ways of talking about or via the food realm in a variety of contexts depict not only centrality of culinary discourse in social life but also a transfer of meaning between domains and the polysemic nature of food.

Keywords: culinary realm, discourse, synesthetic experience, metaphor, polysemy, instantiation

Περίληψη

Το άρθρο προσεγγίζει το πεδίο της διατροφής ως εμπειρία μορφούμενη μέσω του προφορικού κυρίως λόγου. Βασίζεται σε εθνογραφικό υλικό που αντλήθηκε από τη Νεάπολη της Ανατολικής Κρήτης και προσπαθεί να αναδείξει την πολυσημία της διατροφικής εμπειρίας. Το πεδίο της διατροφής χρησιμοποιείται μεταφορικά για να περιγράψει και να οργανώσει την καθημερινή εμπειρία. Έτσι, για παράδειγμα, το ψωμί ως βασικό είδος διατροφής, σε τοπικό επίπεδο χρησιμεύει για να αρθρώσει πλήθος σημασιών. Τέλος, η τροφή ως συναισθητική εμπειρία αποδεικνύεται ένας πολιτισμικός μηχανισμός κατασκευής κοινωνικών σχέσεων, στάτους ή έμφυλων ταυτοτήτων. Ο τρόπος συζήτησης των εντοπίων για την διατροφική σφαίρα σε μια ποικιλία συμφραζομένων αντικατοπτρίζει όχι μόνο την κεντρική θέση του διαλόγου περί διατροφής στην κοινωνική ζωή, αλλά και τη μεταφορά σημασίας μεταξύ πεδίων και την πολυσημική φύση της τροφής.



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

Λέξεις κλειδιά: πεδίο διατροφής, ομιλία, συναισθητική εμπειρία, μεταφορά, πολυσημία, αποτύπωση.



Image 1: Παπα(σ)θιά – Fireplace

Introduction

An obvious place to begin a discussion about food is in the discourse related to it. We talk about food as much as we consume it. We talk about hunger or saturation in the physical and the emotional senses. Meals satisfy our senses as much as our appetites, soul and mind. In the analysis that follows of indigenous ways of talking about or through the food realm in a variety of contexts, we may observe not only the transfer of meaning between domains in the form of metaphor or metonymy, but also the polysemic nature of culinary discourse.

The ethnographic material used is from Neapolis a small town on the Meramvello plain of Eastern Crete, in the basin formed between the mountains of Kavalara at the foot of the mountain chain Dihti to the South and of Timios Stavros to the North. The town with its 2987 inhabitants was until 2011 the administrative centre of the homonymous county with a total population of 5059, while now forms part of the larger county of Saint Nikolas.

The town is surrounded by an external zone of cultivated land of mainly olive trees with some vineyards. On the north side of mount Timios Stavros there are mainly pasture lands and small rural settlements. It is an example of an area experiencing changes in the social, economic and political processes and institutions, where local knowledge is applied to the new ways of life that have emerged. The traditional culinary system in Neapolis is strongly embedded in the local



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

culture and provides a strong link between local people and the management of their socio-cultural environment.

In this respect, the local culinary realm is constantly negotiated in the everyday discourse of the locals, men, women, children and grownups. Thus, as men work hard outside from their households in order to gain ‘their daily bread’, in their kitchens women transform male products by female effort. Moreover, the whole structure of interpersonal relationships is constructed on food exchange, producing solidarity. Eating habits is another point of understanding identity in contrast to others. The whole cycle of food processing (cooking, offering, eating) forms part of the way people understand the world through sensory experience. In fact, in a wide range of contexts people relate their experiences to food, as it happens with the metonymic power of food vocabulary.

Food is perceived as a multifaceted object, an integral part of the socio-cultural environment, shaping and being shaped by social relations and cultural values. In fact we cannot approach the subject in a satisfactory way without recognizing that it combines a range of dimensions: it may vary from nutritional to symbolic functions, from the individual to the collective and social level. As Fischler puts it:

Man feeds not only on proteins, fats carbohydrates, but also on symbols, myths, fantasies. The selection of his foods is made not only according to physiological requirements, perceptual and cognitive mechanisms, but also on the basis of cultural and social representations which result in additional constraints on what can and cannot be eaten, what is liked and what is disliked. (1980: 937)

Food has a material presence, which is perceived through our senses: we may see, smell, touch, taste or even hear it. The experience of food is further conceived, elaborated, conceptualised, and becomes meaningful and conveyed to others, which means that language and discourse are essential in this process of internalisation and expression of a subjective reality.



Image 2: ‘Pinched’ cookie (τζιμπητό κουλουράκι) in a shape of animal, offered for the New Year (Καλογερίδια)



Poetics of cooking and eating

Food habits are highly subjective practices. According to Fischler consuming food is an “act of incorporation” (1988: 279) since food is crossing “frontiers between the world and the self” (ibid). By concluding that “food makes the eater” (ibid: 282), he pictures food as something physical and symbolic at the same time.

Similarly Lupton (1996: 16) stresses that by absorbing food we become what we eat at least at the biological level. Falk also visualises food preparation as “a part of the taking possession of and incorporating of foodstuffs (making it ‘our own’) which culminates in the physical act of eating” (1994: 70). In this the role of mouth is crucial as symbolizing the passage between the outside world and the inside (Lupton, 1996: 18) or as being a liminal zone, highly controlled in regard of both speech and eating (Falk, 1994: 10).

Following from the above observations, a good place to start our discussion would be the negotiation in the local context of the most commonly used word for expressing the act of eating/consuming/incorporating foodstuffs, which is the verb ‘*τρώγω*’ (= to eat, in both the Modern Greek and the local dialect). This word is used in a wide range of other instances figuratively in the local dialect. So, the figurative expression “*Εκειά που το βουνό τρώει τον ουρανό*” is metaphorically used for the point where the mountain top meets the sky. For very close friendship between people it may be said “*Τρώνε και τα σάλια ντως*” (= they eat even their saliva).

Further, we may find it in expressions that mean consuming as a metaphor, such as “*έφαε τη ζωή ντου*” (= he wasted his life), “*τον έφαε ο καημός*” (he is won by worries), “*έφαε τα λυσσακά ντου*” or “*έφαε τα σκώθια ντου*”¹ (= he is jealous), “*έφαε όλον τον κόσμο να ψάχνει*” (= he tried in vain to find something) and so on. Further, figuratively in some other instances it denotes cheating and taking or stealing from others (“*του έφαε το οικοπεδάκι*” = he stole his field).

“*Τρώγομαι*” in the passive voice may mean figuratively be dissatisfied and always complain. So, the phrase “*Τρώει και τρώεται*” (he eats and is eaten) may either suggest that, although someone eats a lot, one does not gain weight or metaphorically that, although one has accumulated many riches, one remains unsatisfied. For the local dialect, ‘*μονοφαγάς*’ (= the one who

¹ The exact translation of the phrases is: “he ate his liver”



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

eats everything alone) is a metaphor for a greedy person, the one who wants everything for his account.

“Χωνεύω” except from the literal meaning ‘to digest’, may further mean ‘consume’. So for example, when used for clothes means ‘be worn’. In the case of physical decomposition of the body after death, the expression “η γη χωνεύγει” (the earth digests) means that the body decomposes and is turned to earth (dust to dust). Moreover, the expression “ίντα γης θα σε χωνέψει” (= what kind of ground will receive you) is addressed to people who have sinned. This is related to the local belief that the bodies of the great sinners do not melt as a punishment for their deeds, so the natural course of decay is inversed denoting the aversion of the earth to the deeds of the sinners.

‘Μαγέρεμα’ is the word denoting either the process of cooking or the cooked food in contrast to edibles consumed raw (i.e. salads) or easily prepared (i.e. ‘ψωμοτύρι’ –bread and cheese or ‘μυζηθρωτή’- hot bread with white soft cheese). The verb to cook is ‘μαγερεύω’, which is also used figuratively in order to denote what is afoot: “Μα όποιος κάθεται καλά τσε πλια καλά γυρεύει, ο διάολος του κόλου ντου κουκιά του μαγερεύει²” (= whoever is doing well and tries to acquire a better position, he is in for trouble). Further for denoting the importance of making provisions in various instances in life, as in the rest of Greece, people use the expression: “Του φρονίμου το παιδί πριν πεινάσει μαγερεύει” (= The child of the prudent person cooks before he gets hungry).

‘Μαγεργιά’ is another word for cooked food. It may also denote the quantity of any kind of edibles (especially legumes) enough to prepare a meal for the family. Figuratively, it is used in the following saying, when money or other valuables are spent for relatives and not for strangers: “Εχύθηκε το λάδι μας μέσα στη μαγεργιά μας” (Our oil is poured in our food). On the other hand people talking about waste use the metaphor: “Ηπιε-ν- η φακή το λάδι και κατάπιε το και πάει” (Lentils have drunk the oil and swallowed it and it’s gone). ‘Μαγεροψήματα’ is a compound word from ‘μαγερεύω’(= cook) and ‘ψήνω’ (= stew) and means all the various legumes produced and stored by the farmer for domestic use. People use the ironic saying in order to denote inferiority: “Βάνει κι η φακή τη μούρη τζις με τα μαγεροψήματα” (= The lentil takes a position next to the elaborated food), said when people compare unequal things, persons or situations.

Apart from ‘μαγερεύω’, “στένω τσικάλι” (= put the pan) is another expression for cooking. The verb ‘ψήνω’ is usually used for baking food. So, ‘ψητός’ is baked in the oven, while the

² The literal meaning of the second part of the saying is “his bottom is cooking for him broad beans”



synonymous ‘οφτός’ is baked in the coals or hidden in the ground used especially for both meat and potatoes. Potatoes baked (“οφτές πατάτες”) in the fireplace, the stove or the brazier, are a favorite appetizer accompanying alcoholic drinks such as wine or ‘raki’, especially in winter time. Many times the verb ‘ψήνω’ and other synonyms like ‘τσιτσιρίζω’, ‘καβουρδίζω’ or “κάνω οφτό” are used for denoting physical or psychological torment.

Food cooked in the casserole with oil and usually tomato is called ‘γιαχνί’ or ‘γιαχνάκι’. Boiled food in water is ‘νερόβραστο’ and metaphorically speaking denotes tame people with no will. This word is mainly used in a negative sense, for food with no flavor, which mainly reminds people of food for the ill or hospital food. In the same context, the word ‘μνιαμνιά’ is used for children’s mashed food as well as for melted food after long boiling. It may also be used metaphorically in order to describe (often as a nickname) a very soft and without courage person.

When on the other hand the food is burnt the expressions used are “τσικνώνω το φαΐ” or “το φαΐ πιάνει”. As a word it may be used also as a metaphor for bad mood and frowning: “Τον είδα απού ετσίκνωσε” (= I saw him frown). ‘Τσικνοπέφτη’ (Pancake Day) is the Thursday on which meat is burnt (‘τσικνίζεται’), a feast full of odours, the chimneys emitting smoke of cooked meat, as each housewife keeps the tradition and people often go out to feast (‘τσικνίζουν’) with friends and relatives.

People, especially women that stay at home, have the habit of eating snacks in between normal meals. The verb used for this is ‘παραμπουκίζω’. Often these snacks (‘παραμπούκια’ or ‘παραμπουκίδια’) are very light and hasty, just a bite of food. ‘Ξετσιακαλιάζω’ is another verb used for the similar action of eating from the pot, in most cases stealthily, as it is considered improper to eat in this way. This does not suit a good housewife (‘νοικοκερά’) and it is considered a bad habit as in this way she pollutes food.

There are as well various words indicating ways of eating. Related to the act of chewing are the verbs ‘μασουλίζω’ (= eat slowly), ‘τσαγανίζω’ (= chew something hard making noise) or the synonymous ‘κουκαλίζω’³ (= chew something hard, especially rusk or dried fruits like dried or baked broad beans). “Μασώ τα λόγια μου” (= chew my words) is the metaphor for being elusive,

³ The verb ‘κουκαλίζω’ derives from the noun ‘κόκαλο’ meaning bone. The folk couplet that children say when they lose their milk teeth is “Πάρ’ μ-ποντικέ το δόντι μου και δος μου σιδερένιο, να κουκαλίζω το ψωμί το παξιμαδερένιο” (= mouse, take my tooth and give me an iron one, so that I can chew the hard rusk)



while “*Δε μασώ τα λόγια μου*” is the exact opposite of being straightforward. Metaphorically also people use the expression “*Δεν μπορείς να μασείς και να σφυρίζεις*” (= you cannot chew and whistle at the same time), meaning that you cannot do two things simultaneously.

‘*Μπουκιά*’ is the outhful, and related is the expression “*δεν έχουμε μπουκιά να φάμε*” (= we do not have anything to eat) which is used to denote lack of edibles or poverty. When eating meat with a great appetite and leaving nothing but the bones on the plate, the expression is ‘*ξεκοκαλίζω*’ (de-bone). This verb is also used figuratively to denote careful reading. ‘*Γεύομαι*’ means taste or enjoy. ‘*Τζιμπολογώ*’ is to peck at the food using one’s fork from here and there, while ‘*tzibo*’ is used for eating lightly. ‘*Χάφτω*’ or ‘*χάφτομαι*’ and ‘*χάβγομαι*’, are verbs about eating greedily, while metaphorically in expressions like “*το ’χαψε*” (= he believed it) or “*τα χάρπει όλα*” (= he believes everything) is a metaphor for naivety. When eating excessively, the expression used is “*τρώγω μνια τσικαλιά φαΐ*” or more appropriately the verbs ‘*γκώνω*’ and ‘*παστουρώνω*’ (both for much food and drink). When one empties one’s plate or when one eats all one’s food, one is said to have cleaned one’s plate (“*πανίζει⁴ το πιάτο του*”). ‘*Ξεψαχνίζω*’ means to divide the meat (‘*ψαχνό*’) from the bones, while metaphorically implies thorough examination searching for the truth. ‘*Νοστιμούμαι*’, coming from the adjective ‘*νόστιμος*’ (= delicious), stands for very strong desire for a certain foodstuff. ‘*Ανεγλύφομαι*’ and ‘*ξερογλύφομαι*’ is used when one is longing for something (not only food) but cannot acquire it. ‘*Ξαρέσκια*’⁵ are special edibles, like sweets and dried fruits and often denotes the special wants of the pregnant woman.

On the contrary, when one has no appetite and eats because of obligation, one eats ‘*ξεραναγκασάς*’. The word is further generalised for any kind of obligatory and involuntary action. ‘*Ανορεξιά*’ is another word for the lack of appetite or for the bad mood. ‘*Ξεροφαί*’ is a very simple and light supper, like bread and cheese. ‘*Ξεροσφύρι*’ is the action of drinking without appetizers. ‘*Ξερο*’ - as first compound literally means arid, while in these cases means simple.

As far as the laying of the table is concerned, the expression “*στένω το τραπέζι*” is used. ‘*Τάβλα*’ is the word for the table laid for feasts and especially for wedding guests. The verb ‘*τσουγκρίζω*’ (= clink) is used for ritual wishing when we refer to drinking or to Easter eggs, while figuratively it means to quarrel (‘*τα τσουγκρίσαμε*’= we have quarreled).

⁴ The verb ‘*πανίζω*’ means clean and was used especially for the bottom of the oven.

⁵ The word ‘*ξαρέσκια*’ comes from the verb ‘*αρέσω*’ (= I like/prefer).



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

Further the saying “*Νηστικό αρκούδι δε χορεύγει*” (= the hungry bear cannot dance) means that you must first fulfill your material needs like eating and then work. On the contrary the saying “*Του κουζουλού το μάτι δε χορταίνει κι η κοιλιά ντου δε-ν-τα παίρνει*” (= the crazy man’s eye can’t have enough, while his belly cannot put away), it is often employed when someone puts a lot on his plate and cannot eat it. It is also used as a metaphor for greediness. For great and impossible wishes it seems that again the realm of food provides the proper saying: “*Να’χαμε ...τς’ ίντα να’χαμε: σαράντα αβγά σφουγγάτο τσε μια χερομυλόπιττα (or χερομυλόπετρα) σαν τ’αλωνιού το-μ-πάτο*” [= If only we had... what? An omelette made of forty eggs and a big handmade pie (or a hand-mill) big as the threshing floor]. This couplet is usually uttered in half, while the last part referring to the hand-mill and the threshing floor is omitted, probably because hand-mills and threshing floors that were elements of the daily life and local occupations until the 80’s, are not used anymore. In another instance of denoting accomplishment of an action under pressure or because of need and poverty people say: “*Ο ζόρες ψήνει τη-μ-πίτα*” (the pressure/need bakes the pie). Moreover, the phrase “*πέσε πίτα να σε φάω*” (= fall, pie, in order to eat you) is used for people who are lazy and expect everything from the others.

The saying “*Τυρί κι αλεύρι λείβγουμε και ζύστρα και κουτάλα και τέντζερη και παρασθιά κι ύστερα τα’χω τ’άλλα*” (= I have no cheese, flour, grater, spoon, pan, or fireplace, but I have everything else) according to local informants is used in the case a woman wishes to make a complicated food, such as homemade pasta, without having the necessary materials mainly because of poverty or because of lack of provisions. In this last case it denotes a bad housewife (‘*κακονοικοκερά*’). Alternatively it is used in the case of a desire which is impossible to fulfill.

Sometimes the quantity of food is measured by the utensil or the means used. Thus ‘*τσικαλιά*’ is the capacity of the casserole⁶. For controlling quantity the palm (‘*χούφτα*’) is used as a measure which metaphorically denotes small quantity. The word ‘*χαχαλιά*’ (which is the quantity of both palms) is mainly used for plenty. So the saying “*και λίγο λίγο το ψωμί και χαχαλιές τσι βρούβες*” (very little bread and lots of greens)⁷ refers to the economy on valuable and rare foodstuffs (like bread) that was done in the past, especially in periods of hunger or war.

⁶ Or, in more exact words, the food that can be cooked in a casserole without being spilled around.

⁷ Mr Mihalis used this saying probably paraphrasing the folk couplet “*και λίγο λίγο το νερό και χαχαλιές το αλάτσι*” (= very little water and lots of salt) mentioned by Pitykakis in the lemma *χαχαλιά* (1983: 1200).



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

‘Κλαδί’ meaning literally branch of a tree is used as well either for small quantity or again nothingness: “Βάλε ένα κλαδί αλάτσι” (= Put in a few grains of salt). ‘Κουκί’, apart from the actual meaning which is the plant or the seed of broad bean is used in order to denote either small quantity or nothingness (“Δεν έχω κουκί” = I have nothing). Pitykakis (1983: 617) mentions the word ‘μεσοκούκι’ (= half part –mainly for legumes and dried fruits that can be cut in the middle) which metaphorically means ‘the least’. Further the expression “Χορταίνει με το μεσοκούκι τση φακής” (= he is full with the small part of a lentil) is an expression used in the past in order to refer to people who pretend to be satisfied with little, especially as far food is concerned, while they have already stealthily eaten.

‘Ψιγάλι’ (crumb) does not only mean a piece of bread and further denotes metaphorically a very small part or nothingness. People believe that the more crumbs the children make when eating bread the more children they will have when they marry: “I have told you not to turn your bread into crumbs, because you will have many children” (Pitykakis, 1983: 1242).



Image 3: An oven (φουρνόσπιτο) outside the house



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

Food expressions instantiating the local social experience

Every day practices related to food in Neapolis are constructed around households and women. Meals, hospitality and exchanged labour are practices related to the household economy, conducted in private space, while also offering an exposure to the public eye. This exposure is directly observable because it is enacted in actual settings or it is part of casual conversations. A considerable part of conversations especially between women is linked to past or future meals, such as where they were or will be eaten, what was/will be served, in what occasion or the quality of the food.

Meals are an integral part of family life, usually prepared and served in the kitchen, the centre of women’s domestic efforts, since food is primarily involved with women’s roles. However, Beardsworth and Keil (1997:73) hold that “the domestic world of the family is inextricably linked to the structures of the wider social system and this is no less true of eating than of any other aspect of family life”.

Being a good of primary importance, bread is also used in a number other of cases metaphorically, especially to denote social relations. The following advice “Πιο πολύ ψωμί τρώγεται με το μέλι παρά με το ζύδι” (= People eat more bread with honey than with vinegar) is used as a metaphor from the food realm again related to good manners, in order to stress that people must always behave nicely and not be bad-tempered in their relationships. As in the rest of Greece, the metaphor “βγάζει το ψωμί ντου” (= someone earns his bread) means to work for a living. When you depend on someone for a living, the popular expression is “τρώω ψωμί από κάποιον” (= be fed bread by someone).

Similarly, the locals also say to denote the importance of the institution of marriage and the inappropriateness of searching for a partner when married: “Ηφαες το κουλούρι σου, κάτω δα τη μούρη σου” (= since you have eaten your bread roll, keep your mouth down now), meaning that since one is married one must not fool around.

Food in the household is a symbol of collectivity and embodies sentiments of pleasure and love. Hospitality is also related to the common experience of food as pleasure. Indeed, in Greek the word ‘σύντροφος’ is the one with whom you share food, in the same way that the word ‘companion’ means the one you share bread with (Counihan 1999: 13). Similarly, local people use the expression “φάγαμε μαζί ψωμί κι αλάτσι” (= together we ate bread and salt) in order to denote



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

intimacy created out of long-term friendship, especially in difficulties. Bonds created by hospitality were valued from antiquity and were reinforced by the offering of edibles. In other countries in the Balkan area, salt and bread are also used to symbolize hospitality bonds.

Further, eating together is an act of intimacy escalating according to the place: locals receive friends and family in the kitchen, while in the living room they receive strangers and have formal dinners in the dining room. According to Bloch:

Commensality evokes a similar dialectical process of temporal unification and diversification. Eating the same food unites the bodies that eat together and eating different foods distances them. This is particularly so when commensality involves eating "good conductor" foods, prepared by highly conductive techniques. As a result, families may be understood as being continually unified not only by biology but also by being commensal units. (1999: 138)

In the social frame, food is often an offering, a gift, of fundamental importance. In the same way, hospitality includes always offering food or sweets. During a visit the man usually asks his wife: “*Βγάλε, γυναίκα, να φιλέψεις - ορ τρατάρεις - τα παιδιά*” (= Fetch something to treat the guys).” If one visits near mealtime “*Κάτσετε να φάμε ό,τι έχουμε/ό,τι μας βρίσκεται*” (= Sit with us to eat whatever we have). Moreover, in the first half of the 20th century, the expression “*κάτσε να φας ψωμί*” (= sit to eat bread) by synecdoche was used as an invitation to dinner. Cretans use the word *ψωμί* for both bread and meal. However, I have heard the following advice against aiding or using family members in one’s work: “*Με το συγγενή σου φάε και πιες, αλίσι βερίσι (ορ αλισβερίσι) μην κάνεις (ορ έχεις)*” (= eat and drink with your relatives, but don’t have economic transactions with them).

Food offering as part of an exchange mechanism is very important for maintaining social relations. Such was in the past the offering of freshly baked bread called *ζεφουρνιά*⁸, since baking of bread was done in large quantities. When finishing baking, women would give out hot bread to their neighbours and relatives. This was also called ‘*συχωρεσά*’ (= forgiveness) as it was an offering usually accompanied by a wish for the forgiveness of the soul of the dead ancestors of the donor on the part of the receiving person. ‘*Συχωρεσά*’ are nowadays called mainly the offerings in the cemeteries on the Days of the Dead.

A similar ritual offering during the weddings was in the past the ‘*καλοψίκια*’, dried fruits and sweets offered to the guests, while the ‘*λουχοννίκια*’ were offered to people wishing for the

⁸ ‘*Ξεφουρνίζω*’ is the act of taking the bread out from the oven. When used figuratively this means “to say things that are impossible”.



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

newborn. An analogous ritual exchange was and is still performed during the feasts of Christmas and New Year’s Day for good luck (“για το καλό”), when neighbours, friends and relatives exchange festive sweets and dried fruits which were named ‘καλοχερίδια’ (or ‘καλή χέρα’ as this practice is now called).

Similarly, until the present day, the lady of the house may hand out food on a plate (‘σκουτελικό’ or ‘πίατο’) with small quantity of freshly prepared or of fine quality food to relatives, friends and neighbours or to poor people as charity. In the first case the plate is returned filled with something else, mainly edible, and sometimes is scented with the skin of bitter oranges (= νεράντζια). There is though, a figurative expression advising against the practice, because unless one provides for oneself, no one will do it: “Απού ανημένει σκουτελικό απ’ τη γειτονιά αδείπνητος – ορ ανήψητος – πομένει” (= The one who waits for food from the neighbourhood remains without food).

From the same word stems the compound “σκουτελοβαρίσκω” (lit. hit the utensils) which was used in the past for drinking a toast. According to Pitykakis (1982: 983) when male parties used to drink, sometimes they would compete in drinking for denoting manliness. Thus, to be provoking, one would say “Σκουτελοβαρίσκω σου” (= Bottoms up) and the other would reply “Κι εγώ αντιστέκομαι σου” (= So, I follow you) and he would drink.

Buying, consuming or offering a foodstuff are not simply manipulative actions denoting change or transition. According to Barthes (1997), by the aforementioned processes food acquires meaning, becomes a ‘signifier’. As he further stresses, food in its wholeness functions as a ‘sign’ between members of a given society, and not only partially in social practices, such as hospitality rules for example. In this respect, the sense of ‘inferiority’ attributed to certain edibles may explain why people avoid their consumption. So, for example in the past the consumption of wild herbs and legumes were equated with poverty while the consumption of fresh meat was considered a sign of prosperity. In this sense we could also differentiate between feminine or manly foodstuffs. So, vegetables and legumes are suitable for women while meat (especially in the coals) is for men sweets. Sweet drinks such as the ‘σουμάδα’ made of almonds are treat suitable for women, while alcoholic drinks such as *raki* with side dishes are offered to men.

Similarly, Cowan observes that sweet substances are linked to femaleness as used in everyday female exchanges, while there is a “symbolic association of maleness with salty and



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

pungent substances” evident in everyday male exchanges (ibid: 184). So, women may consume sweet things in order to acquire the ‘sweet’ disposition characteristic of their gender. These beliefs “not only justify the status quo, they also veil the ways power, needs and interests are at play when people define what males and females want or... should want” (ibid: 201).

Gender roles are conveyed and reproduced through culinary practices. For Counihan “the power relations around food mirror the power of the sexes in general” (1999: 11). Gendered work in the household provide the notion of women-nurturers or producers and of men as “consumers” of the female effort. According to Devasahayam (2005) the symbolic relationship between women and food stems from their nurturing role. So, women are generally pictured as caretakers and nurturers, mainly because of the specific role they are given inside the household, for example during weaning and the raising of children.

The kitchen, as the centre of activities related to food, is a place related to femininity, while it also instantiates the status of women and inequality in gender relations. Men reprimand their wives by saying “*Εσύ γύρνα στην κουζίνα σου*” (=You better return in your kitchen) or even “*γύρνα στις κατσαρόλες σου*” (= Return to your casseroles). The possessive pronoun ‘σου’ (= your) indicates the female domain inside the house. The kitchen is the place where women spend most of their time.

Although this confinement is not women’s choice, but an obligation stemming from their role as housewives, the kitchen might also be considered an area for creating power and exercising control. Food preparation and eating in most cases takes place in the family kitchen, a familiar space for women. It involves a combination of bodily and mental effort, of hands and mind working together, in order to shape experience and enhance knowledge.

Often women function as ‘gatekeepers’ of food flow in and out of the house as happens in the case of planning for the meals – ordinary daily meals or formal ones, purchasing raw materials, offering freshly cooked food to neighbours and hospitality (cf. McIntosh & Zey, 2004/1998). In this respect, food holds for women multiple and often contradictory goals such as resisting, maneuvering, expressing or yet reinforcing gender ideology.

Food, related to power, is further used as metaphor for social status. The poor are the ‘hungry’ (*πεινασμένοι*) ones while the rich are full up (*χορτάτοι* or *χορτασμένοι*). The poor as well *μετρούν τσι μπουκιές τως*’ (= count their mouthfuls) or, as they used to say, *ψωνίζουν με το*



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

ζύγι’ (= buy by weight). Moreover, bread is often metaphorically used for denoting economic status. So, ‘Ψωμοζήτηδες’ (= asking for bread) and ‘ψωμολυσσάρηδες’ (longing for bread) are called the poor. ‘Ψωμοχορταίνω’ is a compound verb (‘ψωμί’/bread + ‘χορταίνω’/satisfy) of the local dialect meaning to satisfy one’s hunger with bread/food, actually said for people who were not able to satisfy their hunger until a certain moment because of poverty and privation. It was particularly used for referring to the period of the Italian-German occupation (cf Pitykakis, 1983: 1249).

The state of poverty when referring to people is also given by the expression “δεν έχει (ούτε) ψωμί να φάει (= he does not have any bread to eat). Temporary or permanent lack of primary goods was until the 60’s indicated by the saying “μήτε ψωμί στ’αρχοντικό μήτε άλεσμα στο μύλο” (= there is neither bread in the mansions nor grain in the mill), while due to the socio-economic changes that followed in the area this expression is no longer used. As a metaphor for wishes that do not come true the expression used is: “Ο πεινασμένος καρβέλια ονειρεύεται” (= The hungry one dreams about bread). People who lack the necessary “λένε το ψωμί ψωμάκι” (= they name the bread dear), which is a metaphoric phrase for scarcity of goods and poverty (cf. D. Sutton, 2001), since bread is the prerequisite of every meal.

The type of bread consumed least for the first half of the 20th century, used to denote economic status. Thus, at white bread (‘χάσικο’) produced by pure and refined wheat flour was rarely eaten and was mainly produced in big cities like Herakleion. Pure flour was used for the consecrated breads (πρόσφορα). The bread of the upper class was ‘σίτινο’, produced by local wheat flour, thus having a darker colour. The ‘μιγάδι’ (or ‘μιγαδερό’) made of both barley and wheat, was the most common type of bread for the middle class. The ‘κρίθινο’, barley bread, was consumed by of the rural population in the nearby settlements. It was considered an inferior type of bread, of the poor. It was usually baked in large quantities and often turned to rusk order to preserve it for a long time. This rusk is called ‘κουλούρα’⁹ when is given a round shape or ‘παξιμάδι’ if it is a parallelogram and it. There were other types of ‘inferior’ bread as well, as the one made of flour from carob-beans (flour of bad quality, as carobs were and still are considered food for animals), a type of sweet bread prepared in periods of great need, such as the Second World War. However,

⁹ ‘Κουλούρα’ is very hard and needs to be soaked in water in order to be eaten. It is cut into two parts, horizontally: the upper part is the ‘πανωκαύκαλο’ which is softer while the low part is ‘κατωκαύκαλο’⁹. Pitykakis (1983: 1249) mentions the belief that the girl who drinks ‘ψωμόνερο’ (water where rusk is soaked⁹) will have fat feet or heavy hairtress.



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

nowadays, preferences of the area to bread have changed and seem to be guided towards either the barley or the dark bread.

Bread and cereal products are core foodstuffs in the local diet. No meal is complete without them. As rice is for East Asia so is bread for Greece and Crete in particular. People of the area say “Ολά ’ναι φάδια τση κοιλιάς τσε το ψωμί στημόνι τσε το βλοημένο το κρασί όλα τα συστηλώνει” (= everything is weft of the womb and the bread is warp and the blessed wine sustains everything)¹⁰, stressing the indispensable presence of bread and wine in the quotidian table.

The phrase “Καθαείς κατέχει ίντα ψήνει/μαγερεύει/βράζει το τσικάλι ντου” (= Each one knows what one stews /or/ cooks /or/ boils in one’s casserole) is used as a metaphor for privacy or a matter kept secret within the family. Moreover, for denoting the necessity for ethical behaviour, people stress the inevitability of punishment, which may not come for the sinner but for the next generation: “Οι γονείς τρώνε τα όξινα και τα παιδιά μουδιούνε” (= the parents eat the sour stuff and the children feel the sharp taste)¹¹.

When someone leads a happy life or is satisfied by the way one earns one’s living the metaphor is “τρώω γλυκό ψωμί” (= eat sweet bread), while for the contrary situation of having difficulties in life (which is more often used) “τρώω πικρό ψωμί” (= eat bitter bread) or “τον τρώει το μαράζι” (= worn by sorrow). The expression “Είναι λίγα τα ψωμιά ντου” (= his breads are few) is used for an imminent death, while expecting longevity is “Έχει να φάει πολλά ψωμιά/or/καρβέλια ακόμη”.

People acknowledge, embody and articulate their distinctiveness through culinary practices. So local people prepare “σκιουφιχτά μακαρούνια” (homemade ‘twisted’ pasta) from local black flour, which differentiates them from the other areas. Their traditional ‘καλιτσούνια’ are given the shape of the lantern, so they call them ‘λυχναράκια’, while in Ierapetra and Sitia for example they are doughy and given the shape of an envelope.

¹⁰ I have also heard: “Ολά ’ναι φάδια τση κοιλιάς τσε το ψωμί στημόνι τσε το παντέρμο το κρασί όλα τα ξεστελιώνει” (= everything is weft of the womb and bread is wrap and the blessed wine crushes everything).

¹¹ Although most people cannot recognize its source, this saying is a paraphrase of the Bible (Jeremiah, 31: 29): “Οι γονείς έφαγον όμφακα και οι οδόντες των τέκνων ημωδίασαν” (= The parents have been tasting bitter grapes and the children’s teeth are on edge). The consequent local belief that parental sin may torture the next generations “αμαρτίαι γονέων παιδεύουσι τέκνα” (parents’ sins torture children), is based on the extract from the Exodus 20 & 40: “Αποδιδοός αμαρτίας πατέρων επί τέκνα επί τρίτην τετάρτην γενεά” (= Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children onto the third and the fourth generation). Accordingly, people often explain misfortune by parental mistakes.



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

The creation of nicknames in the area is a part of formulating personal identity in contrast to the other. Many of the nicknames were taken from their owner’s dietary habits and are passed on to their descendants. Some of them are: ‘χλιοχλιός’ (= snail), ‘ο βρουβάς’ (collecting greens, because he was poor), ‘ο στρούφιγγας’ (eating greens), ‘ο τσιμούλης’ (eating greens), ‘ο ντολμάς’ (the stuffed vine leaf), ‘ο ξυνόχοντρος’ (sour frumenty), ‘ο κουκιάς’ (eating broad beans), ‘τα δυο προζύμια του Χ.’ (the two yeasts of X. used for the twin sons of X.), ‘ο λαδόψωμος’ (eating bread with oil¹²), ‘ο αλευρομούρης’ (= having a face covered with flour, because he was a miller), ‘ο μπακαλιάρος και τα μπακαλιαράκια’ (codfish and his codlings).

Further, local perceptions about the self and the others are still expressed in sayings referring to culinary practices: “Οι Νεαπολίτες τρώνε ψάρι κι οι Βρυσανοί κατεβαίνουν στο Πασπάρι” (= Neapolitans eat fish, while the inhabitants of Vrisses go down the hill Paspari). In this situation, the power of Neapolis is stressed, the inhabitants of which were considered wealthy and influential so that they could import or consume fresh fish from the sea, in contrast to other villages, like Vrisses, which were underprivileged and where people cultivated their arid land with effort.



Image 4: A hand-mill (χερόμυλος) for grinding grains.

¹² ‘λαδόψωμο’ is bread or rusk soaked with oil and eaten by the poor.



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

Metaphor and the synesthesia of food experience

The culinary realm is built on the liturgy of multiple senses which sometimes are in such a way mingled¹³ and fused to such a degree that we may talk about ‘synesthesia’ or “synesthetic experience” in the sense that the stimulation of the one sense and the shaping of a certain image or representation is followed by the stimulation of other senses that shape other images and representations.

This ‘synesthesia’ is most clearly illustrated in the use of the verb ‘ακούω’ or ‘γρικόω’ (= listen) which are often metonymically used in order to denote smell or taste and in the more general sense ‘to sense or feel’. For example “Ακούω κάτι να καίγεται” means I smell something burning. “Ακούγω μυρωδιά” means I sense a smell or “γρικόω τη θρασά” denotes that I sense the taste-smell of the meat. Women also say for instance “Το καρύδι πρέπει να ακούγεται στο γλυκό” insinuating that the nut must be felt in the taste of the sweet. As ‘to feel’ might be used as in the following instance: “Άκουσες το σεισμό;” (= Have you felt the earthquake?).

Taste is often linked to rites of passage in a unique way. Thus, as death rituals are connected with bitterness, sweet taste is connected with christening and marriage. So, for example, bitter coffee and ‘στάρι’ (wheat) or ‘κόλλυβα’ offerings in memory of the dead are often used as a metonymy of death. On the contrary, the sweet almond drink ‘σουμάδα’ is used as a metonymy of wedding, as it is shown in the wish “Στεί σουμάδες σου” (= to your wedding).

Honey and its by-products are used in marriages in order to symbolically ensure happiness and smooth passage to the new stage in life. So a spoonful of honey with almonds or nuts is offered in the church to the couple and to the guests in order to wish “sweet” life to the couple, “για να’ναι γλυκιά η ζωή ντως”. The bride when entering her new house must make a cross with honey on the door. Other sweets linked to weddings are ‘ξεροτήγανα’ fried dough with lots of honey, the ‘αμυγδαλωτά’ (marzipans) and ‘κουφέτα’ (sugared almonds).

The symbolic use of sweet foodstuffs in marriage, especially of honey and sugar, or various spices such as cinnamon and dried fruits, (almonds and nuts) is related to prosperity and happiness, by analogy to the sweet taste, nourishing value and worth of those products. Such is in the wish for the newlyweds: “Όσάν τα πετραμύγδαλα να είναι στην υγεία ντως, σαν τα σταφυδοκάρυδα να’ναι

¹³ Turner (1974: 264) talks about synesthesia as the “involvement of the whole sensorium” which is “the union of visual auditory, tactile, spatial visceral and other *modes* of perception under the influence of various stimuli”.



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

γλυκιά η καρδιά ντως” (= Might their health be as the strong almonds and their heart be sweet like raisins with nuts) (Pitykakis, 1983: 857). Sugared almonds and marzipans are also linked with christenings.

The extensive use of honey and almonds which characterises the aforementioned rituals is in part linked to the great significance of those products for the local economy. We must mention though that the production of almonds significantly decreased after the Second World War, as the cultivation of almond trees was slowly abandoned. This according to the local informants was attributed both to the neglect of systematic cultivation because of the war and to an illness that afflicted the area after the war. It also led to the gradual decrease of the production of ‘*σουμάδα*’, which further led to the decrease of the use of ‘*σουμάδα*’ in the wedding rituals.

The sense that prevails in the culinary discourse besides taste is of course smell. That is why the various seasonings are called ‘*μυρωδικά*’ (having odour). Thyme for instance is a favourite seasoning, which accompanies especially meat and snails. Honey of local production is famous for its smell of thymes (“*μυρίζει θυμάρι*” so it is called ‘*θυμαρόμελο*’).

‘*Μυρίζω*’ and ‘*μυρωδιά*’ are words used both in negative and positive sense. Good and bad smells are denoted by the same word, as much as the body usually comprises the sense both of corruption and immortality, having the twofold dimension of flesh and body. Related is the belief that the corpse of bad people stinks (‘*βρωμίζει*’) or it does not decay, whilst the one of saints or of good people smells nice (‘*μοσχομυρίζει*’). I’ve also been told that the corpse of a man who has consumed dog meat does not melt and deform, which deviates from the natural course of “dust to dust”. According to older informants ‘*αζόγυρος*’, a bad smelling bush, smells this way because Judas hid inside it and so it was thereafter cursed. On the contrary basil is blessed, that is why it has a nice smell. Usually nice smell/odour is related to the flower world and trees, while bad smell is assimilated to the smell of meat or rotten meat.

Furthermore, as Sutton notes (2001a), smell is used to describe social distinctions as well, since people from the upper class ‘smell good’ while from the low ‘smell bad’. Nice smell is often related to ethical behaviour and neatness, especially as far as the young woman and future housewife (‘*νοικοκερά*’) is concerned. The phrase: “*Μυρίζει και το ζάλο τζη*” (= Even her footstep smells nice) is used in such a case, where the young girl is praised for her charismas. On the



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

contrary, the expression “Σε στάβλο μεγάλωσες;” (= Have you been brought up in a stable?) links low origin, untidiness and bad smell.

In this sense female and male odour are different, so women are usually compared to flowers and fresh fruits while males are compared to animals, like he-goats or pigs. Fruits are often used as a metaphor of beauty and youth or on the contrary for aging. People for praising the young girl’s beauty people use the simile taken from the plant world (Pitykakis, 1983: 451) “σαν την κίτρολεμονιά” (like the citrus tree), while for the old or the sickly people use of the verbs ‘μαραγκιάω’ or ‘μαραγκιάζω’ (= rot) both used for fruits.

A folk couplet which portrays the contrast between youth and aging goes (ibid: 587): “Κοντό δεν ήμουνα κι εγώ μαλλάκι μυρισμένο, μα δα΄μαι ζινολέμονο και στα πηλά ριγμένο” (= Once I was too a small sweet smelling orange, but now I am sour lemon thrown in the mud). Another yet reveals the desires of the old people that cannot be fulfilled: “Πάντα το γεροντόβοδο στην πρασινάδα ράσσει. Δόδια δεν έχει να μασεί, μα σκιάς αναχαράσσει” (= Always the old ox likes the green, he doesn’t have teeth to chew, but at least it ruminates).

Youth, beauty and strong health were assimilated to the fruit ‘πετραμόγδαλο’, almond with very strong shell and specific taste characteristic of the area, as in the following couplet “Ε, πετραμυγδαλάκι μου από το Μιραμπέλλο, κι ίντα ψεγάδι να σου βρω, να πω πως δε σε θέλω” (= My small almond from Merabello, what drawback can I find of you in order to say that I don’t want you).

Moreover, the lemon tree, fruit or flower as a metaphor would signify the beauty, freshness and youth of women, especially in folk couplets. Lemon flowers, because of their particular smell were used in various instances, for decorating the wedding wreaths, for covering the Epitaphs or in funerals for covering the corpse.

The function of the senses is crucial in critical instances of the life cycle as in pregnancy; the pregnant woman is considered vulnerable to various stimuli of the surrounding world, especially to smell and taste. This longing or disgust towards food is called ‘βλαμίδι’ or ‘βλαγίδι’. If the expecting longs for a particular foodstuff, she must be immediately be offered this in order to taste it. Otherwise, the one who might refuse her something will get an infection in the eye (“δα βγάλει τον τσίτο”) or something bad might happen to him and his family. There is also the parallel belief



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

that if the pregnant “ακούσει μυρωδιά”¹⁴ or “τση μυρίσει κατιτίς” (smells something), she definitely has to taste it, because otherwise she will lose the child: “δα τση πέσει το κοπέλι” (lit: her child will drop) or “δα πάει το αγκάστρι κάτω” (lit: the fetus will drop down).

Finally, flavour and odour are crucial in the sense of the preservation of the past. Accordingly women use old-fashioned ways of cooking for protecting or recreating the long-gone forgotten taste of foodstuffs. An old woman, while talking about the way people used to make cheese, described the situation as: “Now you don’t ‘hear’ (= smell) butter or milk, because now they make cheese with preservatives. In the past you would cut the cheese and you would smell milk¹⁵. Now it doesn’t emit anything. They have adulterated everything, my child. People are not healthy anymore”. It is clear that people, especially the old, feel endangered by the changes in eating habits, which includes the way of production.

At the same time, this change includes the disappearance of foodstuffs, utensils and related activities, such as the handmade pasta called *μαγκίρι*¹⁶ or the use of hand-mill. Others yet have changed names like the jam called in the past ‘*peltes*’ and made from all types of fruits which is now called ‘*marmeladha*’ all over Greece, probably because it is mostly bought from the stores and rarely homemade anymore. However, this does not happen with the various spoon sweets which are mainly homemade and they are offered as a treat to guests.

The metaphor of lost taste uncovers the quality of interpersonal relations and the sense of communion of the past in contrast to the present (cf. Herzfeld, 1991: 73-75). In an analogous way local people try to revive memories in the individual level by following traditional recipes (of their mothers or grandmothers) or by cultivating in their gardens fruits and vegetables or even by producing their own ‘*raki*’ and wine. They may also still use gas or coals in order to cook traditional food for achieving a better taste/smell, although they possess modern facilities. As a female informant remarked, she uses “*χοντρό αλάτσι*” (salt in big grains), because it adds to the taste and reminds her of her parents.

This brings to light also the topic of memory as a dynamic process, much enlightened by the work of Halbwachs and Connerton, and the liturgy of the senses. In this context Sutton (2001a) examines the Kalymnian case of binding food with senses and memory as well as identity

¹⁴ The literal meaning of the phrase is “she hears a smell”, denoting the fusion of senses and the synesthetic power of food.

¹⁵ The expressions “don’t hear the taste-smell of butter or the taste-smell of milk”, as we have discussed are part of the synesthetic use of the word to hear (‘*γρικώ*’ in the local dialect), which allows the senses to fuse (smell and taste with hearing).

¹⁶ *Μαγκίρι* is a kind of pasta cut in small triangle or square pieces and cooked with oil as a soup.



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

construction. As he states, “The ability of food to generate subjective commentary and encode powerful meanings would seemingly make it ideal to wed to the topic of memory. Memory and its often forgotten alter-ego ‘forgetting’ generate popular interest while encoding hidden meaning” (2001a: 6).



Image 5: A ‘pinched’ cookie (τζιμπητό κολουράκι) with the simplest possible decoration prepared for the New Year

Discussion: Polysemy and culinary discourse

Undoubtedly, food has a physical presence perceived through multiple senses. In relation to the above, Bell and Valentine (1997: 3) note: “...food has long ceased to be merely about substance and nutrition. It is packed with social, cultural and symbolic meanings. Every mouthful, every meal, can tell us something about our selves, and about our place in the world.” So, food admitted in the body functions both in the symbolic and in the pragmatic level of existence. Further it is related to the senses and becomes an inward experience of the outer world. Indeed, according to Appadurai:

When human beings convert some part of their environment into food, they create a peculiarly powerful semiotic device. In its tangible and material forms, food presupposes and reifies technological arrangements, relations of production and exchange, conditions of field and market, and realities of plenty and want. It is therefore a highly condensed social fact. It is also, at least in many human societies, a marvelously plastic kind of collective representation. (Appadurai, 1981: 494)

Food as an experience is conceived in the mind, elaborated and then conveyed to others mainly in and by language and discourse. Accordingly, it could be viewed in the sense of Leach's argument about non-verbal dimensions of culture, such as clothing, music and gestures. These, according to Leach are organized in standard sets and (1976) incorporate coded information in the



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

way verbal language is organized in sets of sounds, words and sentences governed by grammatical rules.

Lévi-Strauss also has observed that behaviour related to food is expressive and communicative: “Thus we can hope to discover how, in any particular society, cooking is a language through which the society unconsciously reveals its structure, unless –just as unconsciously- it resigns itself to using the medium to express its contradictions.” (Lévi-Strauss, 1978/1968: 495).

Food as a part of material culture plays the role of a medium or rather of a vehicle carrying multiple messages. Material culture in general and food in particular encodes significant information which is manifested or communicated via various senses (multisensory experience). Food events then might be assimilated to a code composed of signs that are characterised by the double articulation of meaning and form. People use foods as vehicles of information, as tokens of signs that hold a stable signification and form within a semiotic system. In this respect they resemble clothing signs (Leach, 1976) and can be used for designating cultural categories, such as categories of person, status or of time, place and activity. So, the food code might function as a material system of signs which encode a parallel conceptual system. Therefore, food is seen as encoding cultural principles and at the same time as enabling actors to transmit a variety of concepts that relate to all levels of individual and social life, and successively carry individual or social significance. Food as an organised system offers a lot to the naming and systemising the social and natural environment through its components and structure (ibid).

Nutriments, according to R. Barthes, is not simply a collection of products that might be viewed on economic or nutritional basis. It is mainly “a system of communication” or “a protocol of usages, of situations and behaviour” (1997: 21). In this broad sense it is a phenomenon observed and enlivened in a wide range of human activities comprising economy, techniques, advertising, oral tradition and other mental constructions of a given population.

In this context Barthes treats food as a sign, carrying a given meaning, conveying information: “This item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies; that is to say that it is not just an indicator of a set of more or less conscious motivations, but that is a real sign, perhaps the functional unit of a system of communication” (Barthes, 1997: 21). Locating the constituent units of food as a system helps “to reconstruct systems, syntaxes



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

(‘menus’) and styles (‘diets’), no longer in an empirical but in a semantic way – in a way that is, that will enable us to compare them to each other” (ibid: 23). In this line of communicational perspective food is treated like a cultural object which society needs to structure, in order to utilise it.

Substances along with techniques of preparation and eating habits become part of a system. This means that communication can be achieved via channels of food, while at the same time food categories encode social events (ibid). Further, he speaks about the “polysemia” which is related to the innovative nature of food (ibid: 25). As he stresses “in contemporary French society food has a constant tendency to transform itself from the situation” (ibid: 26).

Tropes in general and metaphors in particular are creative-expanding mechanisms employing transfer of meaning. In other words, each member of a linguistic community has conquered a certain linguistic system, which incorporates the context as well in the sense of a wider frame including verbal and non-verbal (physical, sensory-bodily, individual, cultural and imaginative) environments (Robinson, 2006).

Concepts govern thought and structure perceptions, everyday activity, including relations with others. Metaphor is in the basis of our conceptual system, which plays an important role in defining everyday reality. In assuming that our conceptual system is metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do is also related to metaphor. Thus, we may unravel details of the conceptual system or thoughts and actions by means of language: “Since communication is based on the same conceptual system in terms of which we think and act, language is an important source of evidence for what that system is like” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 454).

According to this theory metaphor denotes a relation between conceptual domains¹⁷, meaning that we may talk about one domain in terms of another because of ‘correspondence’ between them. The source domain is familiar and well-structured so this provides a basis for the articulation of the target domain as well. This is probably why, since the realm of food is particularly familiar and structured, it is often utilized as the source domain for conceptual realms such as religion and ritual, social status or gender relations.

¹⁷ Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 461) delineate roughly three “basic domains of conceptual structure”: physical, cultural, and intellectual.



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

Furthermore, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) maintain that, since metaphorical expressions in language are linked to metaphorical concepts that structure our everyday activities, we can use the former in the study of the nature of the latter in order to gain an insight into the metaphorical nature not only of concepts but also of our activities: “Metaphorical concepts provide ways of understanding one kind of experience in terms of another kind of experience” (ibid: 486). This is clear in metaphors and figurative expressions people adopt from the food realm in order to construct their experience.

According to M. D. Fischer (2008: 9), “a cultural symbol set can be pretty arbitrary as long as it has strong internal coherence and becomes associated with some means of transcription or instantiation in some useful context(s)”. Coherence is acquired through strong maintenance mechanisms especially from association with other cultural symbol sets. Moreover, the symbol sets are stable, transmissible and instantiable either relating to other symbols or to the material world.

So, symbols are not simply used in order to understand or interpret the surrounding world, but mainly in order to contain and transmit useful information about the world that eventually allows people to construct reality “by the process of transcribing knowledge in cultural symbols and their relationships onto what we are experiencing, modifying or in constructing that experience” (ibid: 9).

Food as part of the cultural knowledge has an extensive symbolic use in various contexts as Counihan implies: “Food functions effectively as a system of communication because everywhere human beings organize their foodways into an ordered system parallel to other cultural systems and infuse them with meaning” (Counihan, 1999: 20).

Khare further uses the term “gastrosemantics” denoting “a culture’s distinct capacity to signify, experience, systematize, philosophize, and communicate with food and food practices by pressing appropriate linguistic and cultural devices to render food as a central subject of attention” (1992b: 44). She also employs the term “gastrosemanticity” for the multiplicity of symbolisation and communication via food (ibid).

Food and food habits are part of a culture’s mechanisms, preserving the paradoxical character of being on one hand static and on the other dynamic and changing. So, in going further than the symbolic we might actually look at the dynamics of food-as-process. Rao (1986) and



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

Khare (1992b) in particular have introduced the term “*gastrodynamics*” in order to refer to changing food behaviour.

Lalonde (1992: 75) talks about the meal as an event, as “drama” or as “discourse”, which suggest process and action, responding to Douglas’s “static view” of the meal as an object. For Sherzer “discourse is an embodiment, a filter, a creator and recreator, and a transmitter of culture” (1987: 306). In a similar way, words and expressions relating to food and eating are used in both the pragmatic/denoting/literal and the referential/poetical/metaphorical level and may be seen as performing and embodying cultural knowledge. By viewing language as a form of human interaction, in Austin’s sense of “doing things with words”, the transformative and dynamic power of food language becomes obvious, especially in the form of speech to perform actions, to shape realities, to create contexts, identities and the surrounding world.

We have already described how food categories and practices in Neapolis are instantiated through language and integrated in a broader cultural frame. Common cultural knowledge is further shared and transmitted through generations formally or informally, via verbal and/or non-verbal channels and, as such, it is related to the socialisation process.

So, taking into account that there is “an interdependent relationship between the limits of our experience (what things can do) at any one time and the range of possible operations that can be impacted by symbolic transcription” (Fischer, 2008: 9), culinary discourse proves to be a useful field for examining how a symbolic system motivates material organization or rather how “mental sophistication becomes material sophistication” (Fischer, 2008: 1).



Conclusions

Culinary language binds biology and nature with knowledge, concepts and ideas about culture, while also pertains to enactment of the conceptual idealisation to behaviour, to the embodiment of customs, values and traditions.

As we have discussed in the instance of Neapolis, the realm of food serves as source domain for describing and organising everyday experience. The various interrelations of eating habits to other domains (economic, social, cultural and religious) are represented in culinary discourse. Moreover, interrelations generated through food inside the family and in the social frame are discussed.

Besides the obvious relation to family and women, the symbolism of food should not only be viewed in terms of gender roles. The family meal is a sacred event, as it might as well be an occasion for hospitality, which means opening of the household to the public world. Moreover foodstuffs are often exchanged or offered to relatives and neighbours, as the exchange of ‘plates’ on New Year. It is therefore a part of a broader discourse in which social relationships are expressed and symbolises bonds not only within the family but also between the family and the outside world.

We have also viewed how culinary knowledge is instantiated through language and integrated in a broader cultural frame. The realm of food is utilised pragmatically and metaphorically in order to describe and organize everyday experience. The various interrelations of eating habits to other domains (economic, social, cultural and religious) are represented in culinary discourse. Moreover, interrelations generated through food inside the family and in the social frame are expressed in local discourse.

Food related activities, such as cooking and eating, are embodied multisensory experiences that incorporate, transmit and generate meaning. For instance, gender roles are conveyed and reproduced through culinary practices. As a matter of fact, the status of women and inequality in gender relations are symbolised, embodied in and transmitted through food and food discourse.

Viewing ‘food’ as discourse holds a double aspect, of the characteristic way in which multisensory synesthetic knowledge and experience is expressed and signified through food words and of the reverse process showing how food related knowledge is coded and manipulated through language in order to produce a familiar and well established ideational frame for people to process



Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

their eco-cultural surroundings. The disappearance of words or expressions related to socio-economic contexts that no longer apply is concurrent with the persistence of others. The use or exclusion of food words and expressions and their placements inside contexts account for the variation in the culinary system and how local people perceive and adapt to the on-going change.

In going further than the symbolic we might actually look at the dynamics of culinary discourse. In fact the culinary realm is not simply used in order to understand or interpret the surrounding world but mainly in order to contain and transmit useful information about the world, which eventually allows people to construct, modify and exercise experience.

It is significant in this sense that the realm of food permits not only the observation and description but also the conceptualisation and performance and even embodiment of various cultural contexts in which it is embedded. This is because it contains basically material things (the foodstuffs and the raw materials) secondly because it involves actions (for collection, preparation, cooking, consuming) and last because it involves discourse (both in the figurative and metaphorical function) for instantiating related ideas/perceptions.

Thus we may employ Fischer’s instantiation theoretical model which proposes that statements-outcome of instantiations are not ‘one-to-one links between the underlying symbols and the conceptual instantiation’ (2006: 331), instead they are context-dependent and may give us insight into the underlying structure of a system of symbols.



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Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

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Maria Kokolaki, 10/2013
“Culinary knowledge”

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