# *THE CULINARY VOCABULARY. NATIONAL DISHES AND NATIONAL LANGUAGES AS CONSTRUCTS OF NATIONAL IDENTITIES*

**Adina MATROZI MARIN** *

***Abstract:*** *This article is an overview of the relationship between food and language, first and foremost as symbols and manifestations of a specific culture. In connection to this idea, we also discuss the role of culinary diplomacy as one of the oldest forms of diplomacy, but only recently emerging as a scholarly field. Our dependence on food, which is one of the basic elements in our lives and also one of the oldest forms of exchange, is most of the times the element that brings us together and "softens" the differences between us. Even though it still is a new and understudied field, culinary diplomacy (also known as gastrodiplomacy or diplomatic gastronomy) has been in practice "[…] since the first-time Neanderthal hunters sat around their kill together" (Ruddy, 2014: 29).*

*Food has long been regarded as an important identity marker and researchers have suggested that natural foods together with national languages construct national identities. Similar dishes may indicate cultural contact or common ancestry, which is the same with similar words or grammatical structures. Borrowing of words denoting food items can be seen as proof of cultural contact. Lakoff (2006: 150, apud Gerhardt, 2010: 14) claims that the high number of new terms for food in the US over the last quarter century proves the rising significance assigned to food as a marker of identity. Today it is imperative to have knowledge of culinary terminology from French, Italian, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Hindi or Thai in order to read a menu. The last part of the article is focused on a brief analysis of the main culinary word formation processes in English.*

***Keywords:*** *food, language, national identity.*

## Food as a source of soft power

As Rockower (2014: 13) notes in one of his articles, food has shaped both world history and diplomatic interactions. The author cites Mary Jo Pham, who points out the strong connection between food and economic and political power:

> Throughout history, food has played a significant role in shaping the world, carving ancient trade routes and awarding economic and political power to those who handled cardamom, sugar, and coffee. Trade corridors such as the incense and spice route through India into the Levant and the triangular trade route spanning from Africa to the Caribbean and Europe laid the foundations for commerce and trade between modern nation-states. Indeed, these pathways encouraged discovery—weaving the cultural fabric of contemporary societies, tempering countless palates, and ultimately making way for the globalization of taste and food culture.[1] (apud Rockower, *ibid.*)

The idea is supported by Gerhardt (2013: 4), who claims that both food and language have an intricate connection to power, not only in the world at large, but also in smaller groups (where fathers usually get served first).

* University of Pitești, adinamtrozi@upit.ro

[1] Pham, Mary Jo. "Food as Communication: A Case Study of South Korea's Gastrodiplomacy." Journal of International Service 22.1 (2013): Web, apud Rockower, 2014: 13)



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Along with music, food creates an emotional and trans-national connection, which goes beyond language barriers. Food (cuisine) is a tangible tie to our history and geography and serves as a medium to share our unique cultures. (cf. Rockower, *op. cit.:* 13)

> Both music and food work to create an emotional and transcendent connection that can be felt even across language barriers. Gastrodiplomacy seeks to create a more oblique emotional connection via cultural diplomacy by using food as a medium for cultural engagement. (Rockower, *ibid*.)

Oscar Wilde also writes about the importance of food, which (in combination with a well-constructed discourse) can have the most powerful conciliatory effect: "After a good meal one can forgive anybody, even one's relatives." (apud Schmitt, 2014: 39) Sam Chapple-Sokol (2014: 40) reiterates and reinforces the idea, showing that the simple sharing of a meal can be enough for a connection to be made: "Food, as a vital part of life, quickly removes many barriers to interaction. The act of eating together, or commensality, can set the table for potentially healing conversations."

**Culinary diplomacy**

In 2013, the former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged that food is the oldest form of diplomacy. Culinary diplomacy is a recently emerging trend and one of the most exciting in public diplomacy, which justifies the interest manifested by a series of disciplines that "have joined in the feast of studying the symbolic function of food." (Fellner, 2013: 249) It has developed in the last ten years as a way for countries to use their unique culinary histories to promote themselves on the global stage. (cf. Ruddy, 2014)

> The most effective cultural diplomacy takes national traits and cultures, distills them to their most tangible forms, and communicates them to audiences abroad. Like the successful use of music as cultural diplomacy, gastrodiplomacy also seeks to create a tangible, emotional and trans-rational connection. (Rockower, *op. cit*.: 13)

The study of food as a manifestation of a specific culture has its roots in anthropology and history. (cf. Mendelson Forman and Chapple-Sokol, *op. cit*: 25) Even though it still is a new and understudied field, culinary diplomacy (also known as gastrodiplomacy or diplomatic gastronomy) has been in practice "[…] since the first time Neanderthal hunters sat around their kill together" (Ruddy, *op. cit*: 29). According to Rockower (*op. cit.*)

> The subject of culinary cultural diplomacy—how to use food to communicate culture in a public diplomacy context—began with the application of academic theories of public diplomacy to case studies in the practice of the cultural diplomacy craft. Gastrodiplomacy was borne out of pinpointing case studies in the field and connecting these cases to a broader picture.

Sam Chapple-Sokol (*op. cit.:* 25) defines culinary diplomacy as "the use of food and cuisine as an instrument to create cross-cultural understanding in the hopes of improving interactions and cooperation" and identifies three levels of culinary diplomacy, from government-to-government interaction behind closed doors to government-to-citizen public diplomacy efforts, as well as citizen culinary diplomacy.



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Culinary diplomacy was first mainstreamed and perfected by Thailand through their 2002 "Global Thai Program".[1] (cf. Ruddy, *op. cit*.: 29) Since then, scholars have started "to analyze those people, organizations, and governments who use this tool every day in restaurants, at exhibitions, and at research institutes." (Chapple-Sokol, *op. cit.:* 40)

However, even though it was proved to be a major catalyst for conflict, food is not a universal method for conflict resolution.

> […] for protracted social conflicts, with deeply entrenched sides who have limited interaction, more than mere contact is necessary. […] As Eric Maddox stressed, food is the quickest way to remove barriers to conversation. It will not be a panacea to the world's ills, though at the citizen level it may be able to bring people together for mutual goals and shared outcomes. This new instrument of conflict resolution, as old as human existence, may prove to be a valuable addition to our toolbox as we confront conflicts both new and old. (Chapple-Sokol, *ibid.*: 44)

**Food and language**

Our dependence on food, which is one of the basic elements in our lives and also one of the oldest forms of exchange, is most of the times the element that brings us together and "softens" the differences between us. When analyzing our relationship with food, we should consider that "[…] it is not just eating food together, but thinking about it, preparing it, and serving it together as well, that provide true opportunities for improving interactions and cooperation. **(**Chapple-Sokol, *ibid.)*

Nevertheless, "[…] the various different processes of cooking and preparing things to eat are seen as an easily identifiable characteristic that sets us apart."[2] (Schmitt, *op. cit*.: 36) Food has long been regarded as an important identity marker ("Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are" - Brillat Savarin, 1826) and researchers have suggested that natural foods together with national languages construct national identities.

> There are vast differences both in the food-related behavior of different cultures, as well as in the languages of the world. There is nothing natural or inevitable about food preferences or syntactic structures. "Food is a bridge between nature and culture (Fischler 1988 in Germov and Williams 2008: 1) and so is language. […] Hence, every coherent social group has its unique foodways (Counihan, 1999: 6) and its own unique language use. You are different or you are the same depending on what you eat and how you speak. […] "If there is one issue as deeply personal as food it is language and dialect." (Delamont, 1995: 193) Both food and language are used to maintain and create human relationships. The dinner table is a rich site for socialization and language acquisition. Eating and talking are used to construct social hierarchies, class, ethnicity, caste, the difference between rich and poor. (cf. Gerhardt, *op. cit*.: 3, 4)

Savarin's phrase is recalled and illustrated by Padolsky, who discusses about the assumption according to which our identity is derived from and strongly linked to the

[1] Rockower, Paul. "The Gastrodiplomacy Cookbook."The Huffington Post. September 14, 2010 apud Rudd, 2014: 29

[2] Cox, Jay Ann. Eating the Other: Ethnicity and the Market for Authentic Mexican food in Tucson, Arizona. Diss. University of Arizona, 1993. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1993. Print, apud Schmitt, 2014: 36)



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foods and culinary habits that are important for us. These are a reflection of our language, culture, history, traditions and religion.

> From an ethnic perspective, the assumption has been that your identity can somehow be connected to, or even induced from, the foods that have significance for you and your group, foods that reflect your ethnic language, culture, history, traditions religion and so on. If you are Ukrainian, you eat cabbage rolls; if you are Jewish you eat matzo ball soup; if you are Chinese you eat har gow, and so on. In other words, you are what you eat (2005, n.p.) (apud Fellner, 2010: 245)

On the other hand, Matei Pleșu (2015) thinks that it is more suitable to talk about and to use the syntagm ”local/ regional specificity” instead “national specificity”. That is why, the author adds, in Germany there are no restaurants serving German specific food, but rather restaurants offering Bavarian, Saxon, Thuringian or Berliner food.[1]

The words wander around the globe together with the food items they designate. (cf. Gerhardt, 2010: 16) Thus, food can be brought to countries and their languages (terms like *maize*, cf. Franconie, 2000, but also *potato* and *turkey*), but languages can also be brought to new countries and their food. (cf. Gerhardt, *ibid*.: 19) Food and language are even more closely connected, as actual real-life practices of eating have been shown to be intricately interwoven with interactional linguistic practices (cf. Erikson, 1982, Mondada, 2009 apud Gerhardt, *ibid*.: 14) Whitfield (2005, apud Gerhardt, *ibid.*: 15) claims that even the evolution of dishes follows the same patterns as the evolution of languages.

Language and cuisine do differ, the main reason being the material resources, which constrain cuisines much more than they constrain languages. (cf. Laudan, 2010: 215) Food names vary from place to place, but similar dishes may indicate cultural contact or common ancestry, which is the same in the case of similar words or grammatical structures. Borrowing of words denoting food items can be seen as proof of cultural contact. On the other hand, similar dishes arise as a result of the fact that in a given region, cultures depend on the same food items for climatic and historical reasons: some plants are endemic while others are brought to places at a certain point in time following historical events. (cf. Gerhardt, *op. cit*.: 15)

For example, the Turkish name for meatballs, *kofte* is derived from the Persian word for minced. However, the ancient origin seems to be forgotten, since *koftes* are considered typically Turkish. […] In contemporary Arab lands, the Persian/ Turkish *kofte* is used to refer to meatballs. (Öney Tan, 2010: 346) The word has also been borrowed into Romanian[2], whose history is closely connected to that of the Turkish people.

> Food and languages are both mouth related. And, just as the common Indo-Germanic fund of most European languages does not diminish their peculiarities, the specific character of each individual idiom, or just as the influence and the borrowings from Slavic, Turkish or French do not make the Romanian language less Romance, the eastern cabbage roll, the polenta made from Latin-American cornmeal or the Turkish-Persian meatball do not

[1] http://www.bucataria-lui-radu.ro/blog/27/oralitatea-bucatelor/

[2]chifteá sf [At: H IX, 365 / V: chef~, chiof~, chiuf~, cuf~ / Pl: ~de / E: tc köfte] 1 Preparat culinar făcut din carne tocată și prăjită în ulei. Micul dicționar academic, ediția a II-a, 2010



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> transform the Romanian cuisine into a pastiche, a depersonalized mixture of borrowed tastes, at least for the reason that the Romanian cabbage roll has a totally different taste from the Turkish one. The exogenous origin does not necessarily cancel the local/ regional specificity. (Pleșu, 2015)[12]

Yet, we still have to explain the way in which more peoples who at first sight have nothing in common share particular food dishes. Such an example is the *haggis*[3], considered to be a national traditional dish in Scotland. [45] It is associated with the name of Scotland's national poet, Robert Burns, and plays a central role in the Burns supper, which is held on January 25, when he is commemorated. Surprisingly or not, it appears that dishes similar to haggis are found in a number of other cultures. Among them, the Romanian ***drob***[67], the main dish served on Easter Day.

> ***Chireta*** is a flavorful rustic dish in the counties of Ribagorza, Sobrarbe, and Somontano de Barbastro, high up in the Spanish Pyrenees; it is an Aragonese type of haggis. In the Catalan counties of Alta Ribagorça and Pallars, chireta is known as *gireta*, or *girella*, respectively. [...] *Chireta* literally means "Inside Out"—the sheep's intestines which make up the casings are cleaned and turned inside out for a smoother, more appetizing appearance.

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[1] http://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/tema-saptamanii/articol/oralitatea-bucatelor

[2] "Bucatele şi limbile sînt deopotrivă „de-ale gurii". Şi, la fel cum fondul comun indo-germanic al celor mai multe limbi europene nu diminuează particularitatea, specificul fiecărui idiom în parte sau, aşa cum influenţele şi împrumuturile din slavă, turcă sau franceză nu fac din română o limbă mai puţin romanică, tot astfel, sarmaua orientală, mămăliga din mălai latino-american sau chifteaua turco-persană nu transformă bucătăria românească într-o pastişă, într-un amestec depersonalizat de gusturi împrumutate; măcar pentru simplul fapt că sarmaua românească are un cu totul alt gust decît cea turcească. Originea exogenă nu anulează în mod necesar specificul local."

[3] [1375–1425; late Middle English hageys < Anglo-French *hageis=hag- (root of haguer to chop, hash < Middle Dutch hacken to hack1) + -eis n. suffix used in cookery terms]

[4] Haggis is a traditional Scottish sausage made from a sheep's stomach stuffed with diced sheep's liver, lungs and heart, oatmeal, onion, suet and seasoning. Most haggis is part-cooked before being sold and needs to be simmered in boiling water for one to two hours. Haggis is traditionally served with 'neeps 'n' tatties' – mashed swede and potatoes – and whisky on Burns Night (http://www.bbc.co.uk/food/haggis)

[5] Haggis is traditionally served (as the main dish) with the Burns supper on January 25, when Scotland's national poet, Robert Burns, is commemorated. He wrote the poem *Ode Tae a Haggis* [...]. During Burns's lifetime haggis was a popular dish for the poor, as it was very cheap being made from leftover, otherwise thrown away, parts of a sheep (the most common livestock in Scotland), yet nourishing.

Whether the whole event is formal or not, everyone stands as the haggis is brought in by the cook, generally accompanied by a piper playing bagpipes. The host then recites the *Address To a Haggis*. This custom has been carried through the years and is firmly established as one of the key recitals at any Burns Supper, celebrated by millions throughout the world.
(http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Haggis)

[6] **Drob** is a Romanian dish, similar to haggis, traditionally served as the main dish at Easter. It is a cooked mix of spiced minced lamb organs (liver, heart, and lungs) together with green onions and eggs, cooked in the lamb's stomach. (Lica, 2008).
(http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Haggis)

[7] DROB1, (1) drobi, s. m., (2, 3) droburi, s. n. 1. S. m. Bucată, bulgăre mai mare de sare; p. gener. bucată mare și compactă din ceva. 2. S. n. Măruntaie de miel. ♦ Mâncare preparată din măruntaie de miel tocate, învelite în prapur și puse la cuptor. 3. S. n. (Reg.) Cutia teascului de vin. – Din bg., sb. drob. (Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române (ediția a II-a revăzută și adăugită), 2009)



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> ***Saumagen*** is a German dish popular in the Palatinate. The name means "sow's stomach," but the stomach is seldom eaten, rather it is used like a casing. [...] the saumagen is cooked in hot water and either served directly with sauerkraut and mashed potatoes or stored in the refrigerator for later use. (Martin, 2008) [1]

> ***Slátur*** (meaning ("slaughter") is an Icelandic dish in which sheep's stomachs are filled with blood, fat, and liver. The idea is to use everything from the slaughtered sheep and not let any food go to waste. Many Icelandic housewifes used to make one or two types of *slátur* each autumn with the participation of the whole family.[2]

**Culinary vocabulary**

Lakoff (2006: 150, apud Gerhardt, *op. cit*.) analyzes the high number of new terms for food in the US over the last quarter century and concludes that it proves the rising significance assigned to food as a marker of identity This reality is due to the communities of migrants fleeing from the conflicts in their home countries, who bring with them their culinary habits and rituals that involve food preparation and serving (cf. Mendelson Forman and Chapple-Sokol, 2014: 23), thus introducing new terms.

This abundance of borrowings requires knowledge of culinary terminology from French, Italian, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Hindi or Thai in order to read an American menu nowadays (cf. Lakoff, 2006, apud Gerhardt, *op. cit.*: 18) Sometimes these borrowings are integrated into the morphological system, e.g. *pizza* (sg.) to *pizzas* (pl.) instead of *pizze* (Italian).

> It is a Washington cliché: you can always tell where in the world there is a conflict by the new ethnic restaurants that open. From Vietnam to the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, to the Central American wars, to the civil war in Ethiopia, diasporas have come to this city in search of freedom. With them, they bring a sense of keeping the culinary culture of their country alive in the numerous eateries that landscape Washington's suburbs. […] is not a given, but a cultural construct which can be analyzed by looking at language. Different language communities conceptualize the world differently, depending on their cultural needs. (Mendelson Forman and Chapple-Sokol, *op. cit:* 23)

Another aspect explored by researchers has been the strategy used to upgrade food: the (sometimes invented) original denominations (cf. also Serwe et al., apud Gerhardt, *ibid.*: 17). For example, *escargot,* which sounds more sophisticated than snails, or *chop-suey*, a derivation from a Cantonese dialect meaning "mixed pieces", which is in fact an American invention.

Eponymic dishes (a common practice to name dishes after a person, e.g. *sandwich*, *Chateaubriand* (capital letter) or *carpaccio*[3]) have lost this sign of their origin (cf. Gerhardt, *ibid*.: 19)

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[1] James Martin, Picture of Saumagen, a typical food of the Palatinate region. Retrieved May 27, 2008 (http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Haggis)

[2] Slátur - Slaughter - a traditional Icelandic dish, *Facts about Iceland - for the independent traveller*. (2007). Retrieved May 27, 2008 (http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Haggis)

[3] **1.** Very thinly sliced raw meat or fish, especially beef or tuna, garnished with a sauce.
**2.** A vegetarian dish in which zucchini, squash, or similar food is thinly sliced, served raw, and garnished with adressing.
[Italian, after Vittore **Carpaccio,** *who favored red pigments*.]



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The examples above are the proof that French has played a special role in culinary terminology. France is well known for its culinary tradition and has preserved its special place among the most refined cuisines, which explains why many words referring to special processes or products have been borrowed into the European languages from French.

> As far as language for special purposes or the cooking register is concerned, professional cooks all over the world still use loanwords from French to differentiate between different types of cooks such as *saucier* or very specific kinds of intermediate products like *demiglace* (Riley-Kohn, 1999: 395, apud Gerhardt, *ibid*.).

Besides borrowing, compounding with toponyms is a word formation process used for food terminology is ("geo-food names", as Giani (2009) named them). The locality may stand metonymically for a certain spice or ingredient: *Pizza Hawaii* (indicates the use of pineapple) or *Lamb Provencal* (garlic and certain spices). It is not always clear whether we should interpret these as meaning "originating in" rather than "recipe from" or even less frequent "reminds of" (Zlater et al., 2010, apud Gerhardt, *ibid*.) Often geo-food names are only used outside of the place of origin (cf. Giani, 2009: 47, apud Gerhardt, *ibid*.)

As regards derivation, we should mention that the morphology of the SL is not always transparent, which produced re-interpretations like in the famous case of *burger*. *Hamburger* is etymologically a derivation of *Hamburg* plus *–er* suffix, which was then reanalyzed as *ham* plus *burger*- type of sandwich (cf. Williams, 1939, apud Gerhardt, *ibid*.: 19). The reinterpretation of "burger" as a free morpheme then led to a number of compounds such as *cheese burger*.

**Conclusion**

The analysis confirms the similarities and also underlines the differences between food and language. They are both intricately linked to power and serve as a medium to share our unique cultures. They are forms of communication, used to establish connections. In most cases, they are well-known for their conciliatory effect. Subsequently, food is considered to be the oldest form of diplomacy. Culinary diplomacy, as it is called today, is an emerging trend in public diplomacy, probably the most effective way for countries to use their unique culinary histories to promote themselves on the global stage. (cf. Ruddy, 2014)

Food and languages are closely connected. Cornelia Gerhardt (2010: 16) shows that the words wander around the globe together with the food items they designate. Accordingly, food can be brought to countries and their languages (terms like *maize*, cf. Franconie, 2000, but also *potato* and *turkey*), but languages can also be brought to new countries and their food. (cf. Gerhardt, *ibid*.: 19) A very brief study of the culinary vocabulary reveals first of all an abundance of borrowings, which requires knowledge of culinary terminology from French, Italian, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Hindi or Thai in order to read an American menu nowadays (cf. Lakoff, 2006, apud Gerhardt, *ibid.*: 18), and points out the importance of other word formation processes, among which compounding (including toponyms) and eponyms are the most frequent.

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