

# Tasty Talk, Expressive Food: An Introduction to The Semiotics of Food-and-Language

**Kathleen C. Riley**

**kriley1125@gmail.com**

**Jillian R. Cavanaugh**

**Jcavanaugh@brooklyn.cuny.edu**

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Food and language have been intertwined across human evolution via hand and tongue and throat and brain, hunting prayer and kitchen chatter, dinner discourse and labeling legislation. Thus, it should come as no surprise that they have been studied simultaneously in many contexts by anthropologists, linguists, philosophers, historians, and others<sup>1</sup>. And varying approaches to these co-occurrences have been developed: how food is structured like language,<sup>2</sup> how food activities are organized by language use,<sup>3</sup> and how food ideologies are carried through language.<sup>4</sup> However, never have these various threads of co-occurrence and interplay been explicitly theorized together.

We believe that a semiotic approach to food-and-language may offer just that. With this special issue of *Semiotic Review*, we have collected articles that address the semiotic relationships between food and language in a number of ways; and in this introduction, we contextualize these pieces by highlighting their analytic threads and suggesting how these may be woven into a single theoretical paradigm.<sup>5</sup> We begin with a brief consideration of how these two terms 'food' and 'language' index separate but somewhat similar semiotic systems and then move on to a discussion of how these two semiotic systems can be intertwined, as well as what is at stake in undertaking such an analysis.

"Food" and "language" are used here and across these pieces in the most all-encompassing of ways, basically as food and language in use and context. That is, "food" for us is shorthand for the stuff of 'food', but also the many other food terms that have been proposed to cover the material and symbolic practices, institutions, and understandings related to the production, distribution, preparation, consumption, and representation of food, including foodways and food systems, food events and food values (Pratt 2007), food chains and foodpaths (Belasco and Horowitz 2009), foodscapes (Wenzer 2013),<sup>6</sup> and food voice (Counihan 2004). Similarly, we use "language" to encapsulate all possible forms, functions, and meanings involved in communication;<sup>7</sup> thus, "language" is shorthand for both everyday discourse (i.e. conversation) and ideological Discourses in a Foucauldian sense. Finally, by "semiotics" we are working from a Peircean framework for the study of signs that is based on the following form-meaning types: icons (signs that signify through resemblance), indexes (signs that signify through contiguity or causality), and symbols (signs that signify through culturally-specific conventions). Analyses of both food and language and food-and-language are richer for taking these sign relationships into account, as well as processes referred to as iconization (Irvine and Gal 2000) and rhematization (Gal 2005), that is the ways in which

social actors reinterpret indexical relationships as iconic relationships. In this introduction, we also discuss what we call “iconicization”, that is, the process by which signs of various types are elevated to cultural primacy, resulting in something closer to folk understandings of an “icon,” which may at times seem to draw as well on relations of resemblance (as in, a McDonald’s hamburger and fries being iconic symbols of US food or, for some, cultural imperialism)<sup>8</sup>.

As semiotic systems, food and language share a number of features: each involves multiple senses and modes for making meaning and wielding power in human societies, and jointly they inhabit a wide array of contexts. Thus, the need to analyze their interrelationships seems almost self-evident (and not just for linguists and food scholars) perhaps because both speaking and eating seem so necessary to human existence. Here we are proposing four analytic heuristics for studying how these two semiotic systems are frequently (if not universally) intertwined: language-through-food, language-about-food, language-around-food, and language-as-food. In doing so, we stress that such an approach can help to unravel the processes of meaning-making in which food and language are involved while also illuminating the numerous types of value-production that accompany such processes. That is, we propose that this food-and-language model will help researchers analyze the intertwined ways in which food and language acquire both symbolic meaning and market value. At the semiotic level, both food and language index social, cultural, and emotional meanings across the range of contexts in which they co-occur (from hunting lodges and cooking schools to wedding banquets and sausage factories). At the market level, that is, when caught up in processes of commodification, both operate individually and together as sources of distinction. And while circulated within and across various local, national, and global political economic arenas, both food and language as well as food-and-language come to be differentially distributed among producers and eaters, speakers and listeners.

We propose these four relations of language and food as heuristics for thinking through the myriad possibilities we see shaping how these two modalities may be connected or mutually informing. Whether they occur and are analyzed separately or in tandem, each may provide an analytical window on how food and language create meaning and value, significantly influencing our lives and our world. Especially given the increasing commodification of language in various ways<sup>9</sup> and the boom in aestheticizing, moralizing, publicizing, and fetishizing food and food production processes<sup>10</sup>, the moment seems ripe to bring these meaning- and value-producing systems together in our analyses. While semiotics has much to offer such an approach, we are equally convinced that a focus on the production of value in the economic sense alongside analysis of meaning production has much to offer our understandings of how language, food, and language-and-food function.

## Language *through* food

The analytic of language-through-food encompasses the many ways in which humans use food to express and construct categorical distinctions and sociocultural identities, relationships of solidarity and dominance, stances of desire and disgust, and so on. In other words, here food itself communicates: when physical objects are constructed and understood as food, they may serve as object-signs signifying a wide array of social, cultural, political, and emotional meanings. These values may show up in the form of certified organic produce, kosher taboos, or Valentine chocolates, all conventionally established (if not fixed) symbols. For instance, one communicatively salient food explored by Patrick et al. in this volume is that of the seal meat, which means very different things when eaten in “traditional” ways by Inuit (i.e. raw with knife and hands) in contrast to the “haute cuisine” ways (i.e. as pâté canapé appetizers) enjoyed by Canadian members of Parliament.

Food messages such as these may also be transmitted via iconic or symbolic representations of foods that are otherwise physically absent (e.g., snapchats of meals, “healthy food” ads, etc.), what we will refer to as language-about-food below. Or they may function indexically via the interactions that happen around materially present food (e.g., the prayers said over bread and wine at communion), what we examine as language-around-food below. However, the utility of the language-through-food analytic is to focus our attention on the ways in which material foods absorb and transmit largely symbolic (i.e. conventional, sometimes even iconicized) meanings, such that pigs come to equal wealth, fish fasting, chocolate passion, or spinach strength. For instance, in Riley’s article in this issue about American children’s food symbolism, vegetables have become the archetypal good-for-you but bad-tasting food, while sugar has been crowned as the archetypal bad-for-you but good-tasting food. These are not natural meanings, but constructed, symbolic values, and yet they become self-evident to those who have been socialized to see them as such (in this case, “sweet treats” have become an icon for how to make people, especially children, feel special).

These meaning-values may in addition be larded with indexical significance due to spatial or social contiguity, such as local or terroir foods, ethnic/national/regional cuisines, classy tableware, or sustainable farming and fishing practices. We see this relationship demonstrated in Karrebæk and Maegaard’s piece on a high-end, Bornholmian restaurant in Copenhagen, where particular raw ingredients from the island of Bornholm index the authenticity of the restaurant, thus connecting diners to the food’s place of origin. Similarly, in Wilk’s study (1999) of Belizean cuisine, the “royal rat” (aka gibbon, a tasty indigenous rodent) was interpreted as an international, identity-politics juggernaut when served to the queen on her first royal visit to the erstwhile colony. In other words, indexically and/or symbolically salient foods may also be transformed into icons, or iconicized (in the cultural icon sense as we are proposing it) when either of these two primary semiotic relationships are erased or transformed. This process of iconicization may (but does not have to) occur as a consequence of iconization or rhematization (in these two instances, it took the form of rhematization -- which is less sensually and more abstractly motivated -- because there was no perceptual resemblance between Bornholm food and Bornholmness or between the rodent and Belizean identity).

To make these distinctions clearer, consider how consuming “bitter herbs” at Passover allows believers to re-enact ancestral moments of hardship in the desert because of the apparent resemblance between the bitter experience and its icon, the bitter herbs. In other words, this would be a classic instance of an iconized relationship between the taste of “bitterness”, and a different sort of experience that shares some of its bitter qualia (Gal 2013; see Harkness 2013 for another specific example). By contrast, we find an instance of rhematization in Toback’s article, in which Tully’s Coffee strategically deploys multiple modes (Italian objects and speech) to enhance the value of their brand of coffee and café. In this case, the chain’s value-added product depends on a semiotic process whereby authentic coffee and cafés have come to synesthetically smell like the sound of Italian -- that is, the indexical (historically contingent) nature of the relationship between Italians and coffee has been transformed into a “natural” relationship of apparent resemblance -- sounds like Italian...must be quality coffee.

Finally, we find an instance of what we are calling iconicization in Lasater-Wille’s contribution to this volume on how chefs are trained in Peru. Here, a chef’s “paladar” (palate) and the “sazón” or good taste of the food s/he makes is believed to derive in part from the chef’s ethnic or regional origins. As in the Italian coffee case, the rhematized significance of “sazón” is not based on any “natural” similarity between some sensual qualia of the chef’s territory and the chef’s sense of taste, but on a historically and geographically complex set of abstract and indexical associations, many of which

are only apparent after some analytic digging. Nonetheless, this semiotic blurring is facilitating the self-conscious construction of a newly “creative” and, what we might want to call, iconized Peruvian cuisine.. That is, Peruvians are aware (or at least cooking professionals are) of the value on the international culinary market of creating a new “iconic” (in the folk sense) cuisine from Peru.

To sum up, analyzing language through food -- in short, exploring how food is an expressive medium -- can be revealing of how food works in everyday life. We want to stress once more here that food is also always articulated within political economic structures that give some foods more value than others and more value to those who ingest the delicacies and less value to those who resort to “famine food”. It must, after all, be pigs for it to count as a feast for many groups in Papua New Guinea (and those with more pigs lay claim to more authority) while Coke has become, almost everywhere, “the real thing” (and those who drink it, drink up its “cool” as well).

## Language *about* food

Language-about-food points to the many ways in which humans around the world engage in discourse about food -- that is, communicating about how food is produced and exchanged, procured and cooked, eaten and disposed of. This seems especially true in this historical moment in North America and Europe, where food has become such an elaborated focus of talk, writing, and mediated representation. However, we must remember that although attention to and transmission of thoughts and feelings about food may exist in all human societies, the forms of foodtalk found in the West today are neither universal nor historically generalizable. Just consider, for instance, the differences and similarities between Iron Chef competitions on TV and Bosavi children wrangling over bits of sago (Schieffelin 1990).

Furthermore, this apparently (but deceptively) simple referentiality is complicated by its incredible multimodality -- from the nose-wrinkles and ‘yuks’ examined in this volume by Riley to the online food imagery analyzed by Blum (for example, the maps that tell us how far food may travel before it is no longer “local”). And these multiple forms of communication about food involve a range of semiotic relationships. For instance, My Plate <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/> in elementary school health classes is an iconic expression of food categories and how much we need to eat of each, literally how much of each type should be found on one’s plate. Descriptions of dishes on restaurant menus and in newspaper reviews (e.g., of the Parliamentary seal meal in the article by Patrick et al.) operate at the symbolic level via print and may also include photographs (e.g., of seal canapés) and other images which operate iconically. Labels or talk tying food commodities to their places of origin (e.g., the branding in Cavanaugh’s article or the “local” advertising in Blum’s article ) or mode of production (e.g., as hand-made—see Cavanaugh 2016a) and recipes linking dishes and whole cuisines to their nations or regions of origin (as seen in Appadurai’s (1988) examination of Indian cookbooks) are highly indexical.

Finally, language-about-food must be understood as a kind of meta-sign (a sign about other signs) because, first of all, the food under discussion, like any food, carries significance -- a form of language-through-food -- that may or may not be the focus of what anyone is actually saying *about* it (e.g., someone stating that they dislike foie gras doesn’t erase the meaning of having foie gras on the table, presumably as a sign of international bourgeois distinction -- see for instance, how it is valued over jungle foods at the Peruvian cooking school in Lasater-Wille’s article). Nonetheless, this discourse *about* the food adds another level of signification because it packages an already signifying food into a wide range of otherwise signifying forms, discursive acts and genres such as hunting spirit prayers and dining etiquette manuals, Farm Bills and recipe collections, food-focused myths and rap songs. However, the represented food continues to signify on its own as well as in entangled ways with any communication about it. For instance, interpreting the soup your host has

served as a sign of hospitality, you may respond “politely” and/or appreciatively with: “Who made the soup?”<sup>11</sup> Another example would be the fried chicken, sweet potatoes and collard greens in the film “Soul Food.”<sup>12</sup> Here, the food iconically represented may carry meanings other than those symbolically transmitted by the film (i.e. the home-made Sunday meal that speaks to your soul of love is not, after all, so good for the body as we are reminded by the filmmaker when Big Mama dies from diabetes).

Finally, it must be emphasized that the value of the language and the value of the food in language-about-food are rarely separable into material and symbolic aspects. For instance, in Cavanaugh’s piece in this issue, the hand-written labels, even those in supermarket brands, evoke the hands presumed to have made the salamis (whether any actual hands were involved or not), and thus the added distinction and value of small-scale, “authentic” production. Similarly, stylized speech acts about making coffee can promote the success of a particular café chain, as discussed in Toback’s article; informative food descriptions by servers can lead diners to order (and enjoy) more of the specialty foods on a menu, as discussed by Karrebæk and Maegaard in this issue; and descriptions of the benefits of eating locally may persuade consumers to change their provisioning habits, as examined by Blum in this issue.

## Language *around* food

Language-around-food can be brought into focus by considering the many iconic, indexical, and symbolic associations that are constructed out of food and sociality. Just as Malinowski (1965) analyzed gardening spells in their contexts of use (that is, in the yam gardens of the Trobriand Islands), so can we productively examine the many ways in which people talk in the presence of food; or, to put it another way, the various ways in which food-focused contexts support specific ways of using language. Within this analytic, we include enregistered ways of communicating used by hunters and artisanal salami makers, coffee klatche members and farmers market vendors, domestic cooks and professional chefs, and cafeteria diners at school and work. One signal that these food-focused genres are enregistered is that they frequently come in named formats: coffee talk and cocktail banter (Manning 2012), fishmarket hawking and boulangerie transactions, recipes and quality-control forms (Cavanaugh 2016b and forthcoming), which are called forth by the food-focused contexts. What these discourses share is that they take place in the presence of food (including drink) whose multisensual reality has some impact on the forms and functions of these interactions and the many communicative acts involved, such as begging, complimenting, inspecting, flirting, or gossiping. For instance, Toback’s piece shows how certain linguistic tokens (Italian phrases that express a particular stance, such as ‘with love’ or ‘with energy’) that accompany coffee ordering and preparation in Japan are an essential marketing tool, setting the Tully coffee houses apart from various competitors. Language-around-food may shape what happens to food (if it gets eaten or thrown away, becomes certified as “safe” or not). It also becomes a means of socialization and identification at cooking school (see Lasater-Wille’s article) or a knitting workshop (see Ahlers article). That is, one learns to know that certain people, when involved in certain food events do certain types of talk, and one learns to do these “correctly”.

Although language-around-food does not necessarily involve communication *about* and *through* food, it frequently does; thus, we might want to consider this a form of meta-meta-semiosis (or, signs about signs about signs). That is, first of all, the food itself may speak in these situations (language-through-food), as when, for instance, the finishing of a drink signals the end of an episode of socializing (Manning forthcoming), or the reconstructed dish, “Sunshine over Gudhjem” at the restaurant discussed by Karrebæk and Maegaard, communicates both tradition and innovation at the same time. Secondly, the discourse *about* the food being produced or consumed

communicates at a different order of signification, such as when another drink is proffered and accepted, or refused (Manning again), or when a waiter keys into an explanation of where and how the pork on the menu was raised (Karrebæk and Maegaard again). Finally, the metapragmatic realization of this form of talk transmits an additional level of meaning, as social relationships are formed, or disrupted, and identities constructed or contested through talk around food. In other words, specific norms of discourse *around* food may be linked (iconically and indexically) to the specific foods *through* which we communicate as well as to the talk *about* them. For example, the French engage in the art of assessing the salient qualia of the many dishes they consume, whether at a bourgeois meal (Bourdieu 1984) or a country festival (see Jourdan's article in this volume). For Latinas in many parts of the world, food preparation would not be the same if not accompanied by informal storytelling (what Abarca 2007 calls "charlas culinarias") about both the immediate food and the lives of the people they are reproducing with their food and talk. For one community of knitters described by Ahlers in this issue, "easy" foods accompany non-confrontational conversational norms whereas in another knitting community, eating politically correct foods and taking a discursively political stance co-occur; in both cases, the talk *about*, *around*, and *through* food work together to create solidarity around the activity of knitting.

## Language as food

Finally, language-as-food points to the many ideological ways in which humans understand communication to be a form of nourishment (or malnourishment). For instance, we in North America and Europe think of conversation as a way to "feed" ourselves and each other socially and emotionally. This notion would appear to be based, at least in part, on some of the iconic similarities and indexical co-occurrences of how food and language are produced, processed, exchanged, and consumed. Both are highly multisensual as we pay attention to a wealth of visual, aural, olfactory, and haptic signals when we practice language around food and food around language: both food and ideas may be cultivated, we co-construct conversation as we prepare a meal together, and so on. With both language and food, stuff comes in and stuff goes out (though not in and out of all the same orifices) of individuals; and for both, interpersonal exchange (reciprocal or not) is key.

Seeing communication *as* food—that we imbibe or consume words or texts or that we may produce and prepare both words and dishes for others' delectation—does not have to happen *through*, *about*, and *around* food. That is, metaphors such as "feedback" or "food for thought" abound and may be applied without there being any actual food in sight or under discussion (an example of malnourishing talk would be political rhetoric that we critique for "feeding us a line")<sup>13</sup>. However, when this form of communication also happens *through*, *about*, and/or *around* food, it may be possible to analyze it as a deeply embedded form of meta-meta-meta-semiosis (that is, signs about signs about signs about signs). Take for example, Jarvenpa's analysis in this volume of men sharing food and conversation next to the river. Here the traditional Dene trail food -- beaver, bannock, lard, and tea -- is eaten these days primarily by men and thus indexes their maleness (language-through-food); the talk *about* the food is also about gender relations (e.g., how women would butcher a moose better, wasting little and sharing with kin); the talk *around* the food is an enregistered form of gossip (about women in their absence on the trail); and the talk acts *as* food in that this male eating and talking nourishes them in the face of societal change. In other words, communication *about*, *around*, and *through* particularly salient foods may be read as a highly enriched form of nourishment (language-as-food). Indeed it is the enmeshed and mutually informing modes of semiosis that allow food-and-language to transform indexical and symbolic signs into apparently self-evident icons, or the processes we refer to as iconicization, in which these food-and-language events have become particularly salient and dense cultural models for and of this group. That is, the food talk in this case has come to represent a multimodal "icon" (in

the folk, rather than Peircean sense) of gender: the ways men prepare and eat certain foods is indexically associated with their gender, the ways men talk about food revolves symbolically around women (their absence and traditional roles), the ways men talk around food indexes their own male identities while also symbolically acting as nourishing new forms of sociality given the loss of older food-and-language formations in their lives -- all of these semiotic relations have been transformed into a single "icon" of gender relations in their changing world.

Another key example of nourishing food semiosis would be the "family dinner", a discursive formation widely idealized across Western culture (see Ochs and Shohet 2006 for an overview). While the food itself is understood to nourish the body, the dinnertime conversation is presumed to nourish the child's mind, psyche, and social identity. Here, at the first level of semiosis, the food itself reflects culturally significant elements of who we are as a social group and what we believe in (e.g., our people eat fish on Fridays; we fast between sunup and sundown during this month; we eat unleavened bread at this time of year; our kids don't eat 'healthy'...). Second, the talk *about* food more or less explicitly constructs food ideologies about etiquette, health, justice, or environmental correctness implicit in the family's foodways (e.g., no burping or elbows on the table; finish your spinach if you want dessert; clean your plate because children are starving elsewhere; compost the scraps). Third, the discursive norms for communicating at the table (language-around-food) are implicitly modeled, explicitly enforced, and sometimes negotiated -- e.g., whether we may or may not sing at table or discuss politics, ask for "more" or say "no" when we've had enough, tell a story or problematize someone else's (Ochs and Taylor 1995). Finally, all of this dinnertime talk *through*, *about*, and *around* food is understood as nourishment...and a lack of it as malnourishment. That is, all of this comes to stand for what it means to do being a white, middle-class US family well: it has been essentialized and iconicized, that is, transformed into an icon (again, in the non-Peircean sense). For instance, in middle class discourse, especially as represented in many popular media accounts in the US and France, children are understood to be cognitively deprived by a lack of such food-like engagement and social discourse at the dinner-time table, and this shows up as recurrent worrying in the popular media about how certain American kids (usually poor and/or non-white) are thought to be "starving for words".<sup>14</sup> That this is a culture-specific ideal embedded within a particular racial and class-based social hierarchy is essential to emphasize: the semiotic density of family dinner—and the anxieties it produces—has everything to do with who does it, who is being told they should, and what are the potential consequences for not doing it.

Whether or not we fully buy into the metaphor of language-as-food,<sup>15</sup> or its efficacy as an analytic framework across cultural contexts, it is clear that semiosis *through*, *about*, and *around* food creates many opportunities for the reproduction and transformation of cultural knowledge about food and language (e.g., how to produce and consume both) as well as metapragmatic practices that index how the food discourses being engaged in are good or bad for our physical or spiritual constitutions (i.e. selves viewed as consuming agents). That is, a range of food ideologies and sentiments (e.g., good taste, sazón, the value of local foods or terroir, the gendered nature of food preparation) and a range of language ideologies (e.g., about proper speech and body language, effective argumentation or storytelling, and appropriate topic selection) are expressed and socialized via semiotic practices that occur while producing, preparing, exchanging, and eating food.

Food ideologies, like language ideologies, connect individuals to social categories iconically, indexically, and symbolically. For instance, through food-and-language socialization, children and other novices learn notions of indexicality. That is, just as specific ways of speaking and listening index our connection to specific cultural places and particular historical times, so do specific ways

of producing and eating food index (for better or worse) who we are and where we come from (as Brillat-Savarin noted long ago). “We” may eat these things because we live here and now (see Blum’s article in this issue on “local food” in this issue) or came from there then. Similarly, not only locale but also seasonality and longer temporal cycles determine to some degree the (socialized) taste and (culturally constructed) value of a particular food or drink (see, for instance, Silverstein 2004 on oinoglossia). These ideologies are socialized such that novices learn to attach those foods and speech patterns to those people, places, and times, constructing symbolic and eventually iconicized stereotypes of who people are (e.g., peasant foods make peasant bodies, as Bourdieu (1984) showed).

Finally, processes of socializing children and other novices that “feed” them the knowledge needed to engage in food-and-language practices in particular contexts -- such as a school cafeteria (Riley), a kitchen in a culinary school (Lasater-Wille), an Inuit cultural feast (Patrick et al.), or a knitting class at a local yarn store (Ahlers) -- sometimes also provide them with the means for strategically accessing literal food. To return to the family dinner semiotic assemblage discussed above, children may learn at table to negotiate with their caregivers for larger portions of the foods they come to prize (Paugh and Izquierdo 2009), or smaller ones of those they don’t (Ochs, Pontecorvo, and Fasulo 1992). Simultaneously, they acquire discursive forms and practices with more or less symbolic capital that will (or won’t) then bring them success at school and beyond, which may finally translate into financial capital...and, thus, the resources to acquire food to put on their own dinner table. By contrast, children in other contexts may learn other means of using the communication of deprivation to access food -- aka begging (see Flynn 2005 for an example of the strategies street children in Tanzania develop). A more complex form of this language-as-food semiosis is the case in which NGOs use images of starving children or female intimacy narratives to solicit charitable donations, the latter “feeding” the emotional needs of the privileged class to “do good” in the world (Crane 2016).

## Food for thought

Because language and food are both semiotic and material substances, the relationships across and among them are dense and ripe for analysis. Both are intertwined with processes of producing, reproducing, maintaining, and at times contesting and changing symbolic capital, but also actual capital, as both are squarely instantiated within political economic structures and processes at particular historical moments. As a burgeoning field of inquiry, the possibilities are boundless for exploring the culturally specific ways in which analyses of food-and-language contribute to understanding the construction of symbolic and material value from a semiotic perspective.

This introduction has laid out not only a range of possible semiotic connections, and four specific heuristics for approaching these connections, but also various ways in which these connections are mutually informing and connected to one another in a form of nested semiosis. Sometimes language-through-food resonates within language-about-food and that within language-around-food and that within language-as-food, in Russian-doll-like formation. However, the interconnections can also be unpacked and repacked in a number of permutations: e.g., language-about-food can occur within language-as-food without happening around any actual food, and language-through-food performs where people are communicating around food even if they are not talking about the food nor is this talk being perceived by anyone present as particularly nourishing (or poisonous).

However, the everpresence of language-through-food (that is, the ubiquity of humans using food to communicate who they are and how they feel) seems to be impenetrable and thus not function as flexibly in relation to the other analytics we have offered. On the one hand, this relationship cannot be cracked open to reveal any of the others (it need play no necessary or contingent relationship

with language), and, on the other hand, food's significance (whether a specific food or foodway or food writ large) is almost always embedded within at least some of the other analytics we have offered. By contrast, some might say that language-about-food ought to be the frame within which all the others fit because we can and frequently do talk not only about how people interact around food but also about how talk acts as a kind of nourishing substance. So perhaps Russian dolls is not the best model for this type of case-- perhaps a magician's trick with three cups and a ball (language-through-food) would work better.

Regardless of the metaphor we use, what requires analysis is that each of these relationships forms a nexus within which other forms of semiosis can be seen to interact: foods linked indexically to places can be transformed into (cultural) icons, symbols used to bless foods tend to index identity, iconic food imagery may symbolize status, etc. The papers in this volume accordingly address these semiotic relationships from a number of angles and in a number of contexts. Some of the articles involve primarily language-about-food (e.g., Blum and Cavanaugh), but most involve a lot of language-around-food -- preparing and marketing it (Lasater-Wille, Toback, Jourdan, Karrebæk and Maegaard) or serving and eating it (Jarvenpa, Riley, Patrick, Ahlers). Many of the articles focus to some degree on how language performatively (mal)nourishes (aka socializes) those who consume the communications (Jarvenpa, Riley, Lasater-Wille, Blum, Patrick et al., Toback) while all of them look in one way or another at how humans use food to communicate who they are and who's on top. We are excited to offer this collection of articles about food-and-language semiosis as food to provoke thought.

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## Endnotes

1 For example, see these these most recent volumes: Cramer et al. 2011, Gerhardt et al. 2013, Hosking 2010, Lavric and Konzett 2009, Martellotti 2012, Szatrowski 2014). [▶](#)

2 For example, see Barthes 1966, Douglas 2008, Levi-Strauss 2008. [▶](#)

3 See, for example, Malinowski 1935 and Frake 1964. [▶](#)

4 For example, Jurafsky 2015. [▶](#)

5 This approach has been under development for some time now in prior (and future) presentations and publications. See, for example, Riley 2009a; Cavanaugh et al. 2014; Cavanaugh and Riley in press; Riley and Cavanaugh in press, Riley and Paugh forthcoming. [▶](#)

6 'Foodscape' aligns nicely with Poulain's (2002) formulation of espace social alimentaire 'dietary social space' discussed in the piece by Patrick et al. in this issue. [▶](#)

7 Usually human communication, but not necessarily, as is illustrated by Garrett's (2014) examination of interspecies semiosis between factory-farmed animals and their human processors. [▶](#)

8 The distinction we are making between "iconized" and "iconicized" derives from an understanding that "icon" is used by semioticians to refer to signs whose significance is based on some perception of sensual resemblance between the object and its interpreted meaning (looking like,

sounding like, etc.). An index may be transformed into an icon, or iconized, when its relations of contiguity or causality are reinterpreted or read as relations of resemblance. Gal (2005) has renamed this process “rhematization” (based on the notion that the perception of similarity can be based not only on the senses, but also on abstract ideation), and explained at more length (Gal 2015) how certain qualities of objects can be picked out and interpreted as iconically related to other objects given certain historic conditions and preconceptions (in her illustration, that Macedonian multilingualism was a sign of Macedonians’ inherent chaotic mentality). By contrast, the term “icon” is also popularly used to refer to any object that has taken on some essentialized or naturalized (sometimes idealized, sometimes stigmatizing) significance. That is, the object has been transformed into a sign whose significance is derived from some seemingly “natural” or “essential” commonality that is not necessarily apparent to the eye, ear, touch, nose, or tongue, nor is its “naturalness” and “essentialness” apparent outside of the community of practice that has made the conventional association seem self-evident. What we are doing here is suggesting that the discursive act of dubbing some object an “icon” in the folk sense is also worth examining, and for this discursive process we suggest using the term “iconization”. It is not yet wholly clear to us whether this distinction will be of great analytic use outside of the cases we posit here, and it is clearly not the primary focus of this essay. However, we did want to stop for a footnote moment to consider the slippage between these two uses of “icon”, note how all icon-making (in either sense) is in fact a historical/cultural process (that is, “resemblance” is rarely if ever wholly “natural”), and distinguish between the more or less conscious roles played by speakers and listeners, food producers and consumers, in the construction of such “icons”. Indeed, it was through working with the rich articles in this collection that we realized how the relationship between food and language may tend to bring this distinction into particularly high relief. [↗](#)

9 As explored, for example, by Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014, and Duchêne and Heller 2012. [↗](#)

10 For some analyses of these, see Williams-Forson and Counihan 2012; Frye and Bruner 2012; LeBesco and Naccarato 2008. [↗](#)

11 But see Riley (2009b) for an example of how such language-about-food can go awry when you’re out of your cultural element. [↗](#)

12 <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120169/> [↗](#)

13 We’ve realized that even these metaphoric idioms actually do in some ways entail language-about-food and language-through-food because these are 1) obviously phrases about “food” in the abstract, and 2) the meaning of “food” here, though highly generalized, is still significant -- i.e. the idea that food should be nourishing...or could be poisonous. [↗](#)

14 See for an example of this discourse: <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/10/american-kids-are-starving-for-words/381552/> (accessed 8/1/16). A thorough critique of this “language gap” thinking can be found in a recent article by the AAA Task Force on Language and Social Justice: <http://linguisticanthropology.org/blog/2016/08/29/an-news-the-gap-that-wont-be-filled-an-anthropological-critique-of-the-language-gap-by-avineri-et-al/> [↗](#)

15 Not all cultures, of course, agree that “talk” nourishes -- some believe that solitude and silence, or at least silent co-participation, may do more for us spiritually, emotionally, etc. See for example, Basso 1970. [↗](#)

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