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In search of the beginnings of a foodsemic boom in the history of English

Abstract: Food unquestionably plays a vital role in our lives, as it is essential for our day-to-day existence. It is multifacetedly mirrored in the way we picture the world and communicate with one another. Frequently, food names are deployed metaphorically/metonymically to conceptualize either human beings themselves and/or various aspects and features of their existence. Sometimes, such metaphors are analysed from a synchronic perspective, for example by Martsa (2001, 2013) and Kövecses (2002) and they are perceived as a means of communication. However, food metaphors may be analysed from a diachronic perspective and, as shown by Kleparski (2008, 2012), Kudła (2009, 2016), and Kowalczyk (2015, 2017) among others, in the history of English, food metaphors are traceable in various historically distant periods, and abound especially in most recent periods of the history of English when there are high levels of foodsemic figurative extensions. As shown by Kowalczyk (2024), between the years 1800-1950, there were over 130 cases of food-related metaphor. These numbers stand in sharp contrast to the humble beginnings of food metaphor in Old English and the Early Modern English period. The aim of this paper is to specify the period of intensification and heightened productivity of this phenomenon. The 16th century will be highlighted as the time of a true foodsemic boom that sparked off the process of blooming of this metaphorical mechanism. In the late Middle English period, which spans the 14th and 15th century, only a handful of food-related metaphors are registered and supported by historical lexicographic sources. By contrast, during the course of the 16th century, there were around two dozen food-related cases of metaphorization.

Key words: diachronic perspective, food-related metaphor, Early Modern English, macrocategory HUMAN BEING

1. Introduction

Food has always been an essential element in human life. Obviously, culinary standards, techniques and customs have changed throughout centuries, but, at the same, food as such occupies a central position in the life of individuals, families

and nations. In his book entitled *Near a Thousand Tables*, Felipe Fernández-Armesto claims that the history of human kind is also a history of food and draws our attention to the significance of food, its contribution to social and religious interactions and its unquestionable influence on our behavioural patterns, aesthetic preferences and so forth. Clearly, the topic of food and food consumption may be discussed from various angles and with a range of purposes in mind. However, the perspective taken here is that of the language historian, and we shall concentrate on both the quantitative and qualitative parameters related to what has come to be known as food-related metaphorization.

The term *foodsemy*, introduced in the works of Kleparski (2008), was originally used indiscriminately with reference to all kinds of food-related metaphors targeted at the macrocategory **HUMAN BEING**. The analyses of language material that follows have shown that the category of foodsemic transfers may be further subdivided into various, more specific types and human-related subcategories of metaphorization discussed here, such as **ATTRACTIVE FEMALE HUMAN BEING**, **IMMORAL FEMALE HUMAN BEING**, **FEMALE BODY PARTS**, **FEMALE PRIVY PARTS** and **MALE PRIVY PARTS**.

The cases of metaphorical extensions affecting the conceptual macrocategory **FOODSTUFFS** will be investigated with the aid of the model of analysis proposed by Kleparski (1997, 2002, 2008). In short, this model is based on the general tenets of Conceptual Metaphor Theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), in that it employs the general concept of mappings occurring between the source and target domains, together with the formulation and phrasing of possible paths/schemes of development, but, crucially for the analysis developed here, it makes use of other elements, such as **CONCEPTUAL DOMAINS** (CDs) and attributes. One may say that such conceptual dimensions as TASTE, SMELL, SHAPE or SIZE are involved in the possible paths of semantic change from the **DOMAIN OF TASTE** [...], **DOMAIN OF SMELL** [...], **DOMAIN OF SHAPE** [...] and the **DOMAIN OF SIZE** [...] from the macrocategory **FOODSTUFFS** to the macrocategory **HUMAN BEING**.

The lexico-semantic inventory of food-related metaphorization processes in English is difficult to determine with absolute precision, but all in all, one can speak of at least two hundred documented cases of foodsemy that emerged in the period 1300–1950 as shown by the extensive analysis offered by Kowalczyk (2024), which merely mirrors the material registered and evidenced in a variety of historical lexicographic works, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Green's Dictionary of Slang*, *Green's Online Dictionary of Slang*, *Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, *Dictionary of Word Origin*, *The Diner's Dictionary*, *Word Origins*, *The Secret Histories of English Words from A to Z*, *Partridge's Dictionary of Slang* and *The Probert Encyclopaedia of Slang*.

Given the extensiveness of empirical material and the aims of this paper one may feel obliged to start with the things that – diachronically speaking – came first.

The first cases of foodsemic metaphorical transfer are registered during 14th–15th century English when such Middle English lexical items as *nut*, *bacon*, *shrimp*, *cod* and *eggs* developed secondary senses. The basis for viewing individual cases as cases of foodsemy rather than other related categories of semantic change as, for example zoosemy, has been based on the results of classification offered by Glazier's (1997) *Random House Word Menu*. The lexicographer lists 1,388 food-related lexical items, 30% of which have shown a tendency to develop food-related metaphorical/metonymic extensions. These extensions are frequently related to such general conceptual categories as **HUMAN BEING**, **INANIMATE OBJECTS** and **ABSTRACTS**.

2. Foodsemic metaphor through the ages

The dictionary-based data indicates that the lexical items *shrimp* and *bacon* may be treated as the first instances of foodsemy recorded in the history of English.¹ To be more specific, in the course of the 14th century, the former started to be used in reference to any small, weak, insignificant person, while the latter was used in a sense 'human flesh, a human being'.² The instances of foodsemic extensions discussed here may be perceived and interpreted by means of the CG (Cognitive Grammar) apparatus employed earlier in this type of linguistic studies.

First of all, the general path of metaphorical development followed here may be formulated as <HUMAN BEING IS/IS PERCEIVED AS A FOODSTUFF>. In the case of the development of *shrimp*, it is the conceptual **DOMAIN OF SIZE** [...] that is involved in the rise of the new sense as the quality [SMALL] is, by all means, the most relevant link between the original and metaphorical sense. Here, one of the physical characteristics of a shrimp is translated onto the level

¹ However, it is worth mentioning that the lexical item *nut* may be treated as the very first case of food metaphor. According to the *OED*, it developed the first metaphorical sense 'something of trifling value' in the 14th century and the first instance of its use dates back to around 1301: He ne yaf a *note* [*nute*] of his opes. (...) Nouth þe worth one *nouth* [*nute*]. Interestingly, this lexical item has been one of the most productive cases of metaphORIZATION processes as it developed a dozen secondary senses in the course of its development including 'a question difficult to answer', 'a problem' (the 15th century); 'female genitalia', 'glans of penis' (the 16th century); 'a matter or undertaking difficult to accomplish', 'a person difficult to deal with' (the 17th century); 'testicles', 'a small knob of meat' (the 18th century); 'the pancreas', 'part of the caul', 'the head', 'crazy, insane', 'coal in small lumps' (the 19th century); 'a fashionable or showy young man of affected elegance' and 'the amount of money required for a venture', 'any sum of money' (in the first half of the 20th century).

² The newly developed senses may be illustrated by means of the following quotations provided in the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

1) *bacon* > 'human flesh, a human being'

– 1386 As a lethernpurs lolled his chekes [...] And as a bondeman his *bacon* his berd was unshaue.

2) *shrimp* > 'a small, weak insignificant person'

c. 1386 Religioun hath take up al the corn Of tredyng, and we borel men ben *shrimpes*!

of qualitative characteristics of a human being, that is, the metaphorically active attributes [SMALL] and [WEAK].

Having shown one of the early cases of foodsemic extension viewed in terms of the methodological apparatus employed here, let us now turn our attention to the 16th century, the period when the type of transfers analysed here appeared in great numbers.

The following cases can be proved to have emerged in the period under discussion:

POULTRY AND GAME

1. *capon* > ‘a eunuch, an impotent man’
2. *duck* > ‘a lover, a sweetheart’ (a general term of affection)
3. *hare* > ‘a prostitute, a promiscuous woman’ (obs.)
4. *pheasant* > ‘a promiscuous woman’ (obs.)
5. *pigeon* > ‘a young woman’ (obs.), ‘one who is susceptible to a confidence trick or other variety of fraud’ (obs.)
6. *pullet* > ‘an adolescent girl, usually in a sexual context’ (obs.), ‘a young prostitute’ (obs.)
7. *quail* > ‘a prostitute’ (obs.)

MEAT PRODUCTS

8. *beef* > ‘vagina’, ‘sexually appealing woman’
9. *meat* > ‘woman and her body as a sexual pleasure’, ‘penis’, ‘vagina’
10. *marrow* > ‘semen’ (obs.)
11. *mutton* > ‘a promiscuous woman, a prostitute’, ‘vagina’

FISH

12. *cod* > ‘a testicle’
13. *crab* > ‘a sour or ill-tempered person’
14. *fish* > ‘vagina’, ‘a woman’
15. *herring* > ‘a foolish, offensive or inconsequential person’ (obs.)
16. *oyster* > ‘vagina’, ‘a woman’

VARIA

17. *carrot* > ‘penis’
18. *lentils* > ‘freckles or spots on the skin’ (obs.)
19. *nut* > ‘the glans of penis’
20. *nuts* > ‘female genitalia’
21. *pie* > ‘woman’, ‘vagina’
22. *pudding* > ‘vagina’, ‘penis’ (obs.)

Given the set above one may say that some of the transferred senses that appeared in the course of the 16th century have survived to the modern day, while others have become obsolete at later stages of the development of English. All in all, there have been 10 such cases, which constitutes 37 % of the senses of all vocabulary items

discussed here. For example, out of the first four metaphorical extensions developed in the case of *bacon*, *shrimp*, *eggs* and *cod* several of them are present in current use. For example, the noun *shrimp* meaning ‘a small, weak, insignificant person’ and *eggs*, which in present day English is used in reference to testicles and *cod* to the penis.

One may say that from the qualitative angle, the differences in a typical menu of our ancestors become visible and it may be said that their culinary preferences are deeply embedded both in the culture and in the language of the nation. One cannot fail to notice that the basis for metaphorical transfers were plain, ordinary, everyday and well-known food items. As shown by historical reports the 16th century diet was full of meat and meat products, fish and other common items, such as eggs, butter and nuts. Also, in the 17th and 18th centuries meat and fish governed dinner tables, but with time certain delicacies were introduced into the diet, for instance sausage and cheesecake. However, throughout the history of the English nation meat products remained popular. It is, therefore, unsurprising that food products considered as consumer staples in a certain century are likely to give rise to metaphorical shifts at various periods in the history of English. Interestingly, there are some food items which are still very common and popular, whereas others are no longer consumed and declined in popularity.

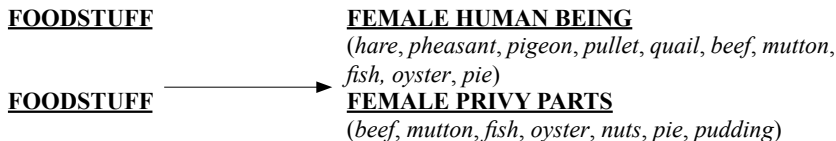
Many of the earliest metaphorical senses have become deeply rooted and occupy a permanent position in the lexico-semantic system of English. For instance, the plural *eggs* is still used today in the sense ‘testicles’, one of the oldest foodsemic metaphors, and the rise of this sense dates back to the second half of the 15th century. Many other foodsemic transfers have remained in the language. This preference group comprises, among others, such food items as mutton, beef, bread and eggs. Another group label includes, for example, marrow, which was treated as a delicacy in the past, but is no longer regarded as such. Similarly, numerous cases of metaphorical transfer that appeared in the course of the 16th century, and at other periods of English, mostly in the 17th century, and particularly those related to the category **POULTRY AND GAME** fell out of use during later periods of the history of English. This group includes *hare*, *pheasant*, *quail*, *pigeon*, *squall*, *duck*, *poultry*, *partridge*, *pullet*. Interestingly, these lexical items acquired one of female related senses ‘a woman’ or ‘a prostitute, a promiscuous woman’ in the course of their semantic development and, what is more, the newly acquired senses all vanished at later periods of the history of English.

3. On the major driving forces of foodsemy

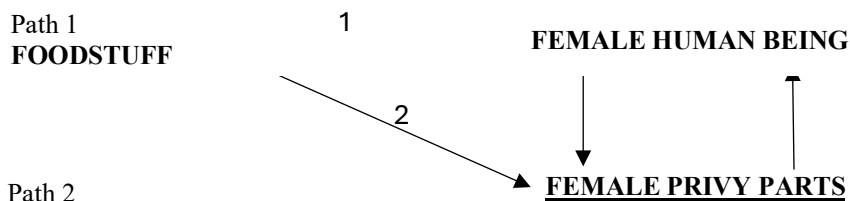
Coming back to the foodsemic boom, more than half of lexical items enumerated above are female-specific. The overall and pervasive schema of their development may be formulated as <FEMALE HUMAN BEING IS/IS PERCEIVED AS A FOOD ITEM>; or more specifically <ATTRACTIVE/IMMORAL FEMALE HUMAN

BEING IS/IS PERCEIVED AS A FOOD ITEM>, but also <FEMALE PRIVY PARTS ARE PERCEIVED AS A FOOD ITEM>. One can certainly trace certain well-used paths of this semantic transfer that started to be at work in the 16th century.

The diachronic analysis of the English data related to the mechanism of foodsemy points to the following general patterns of change:



The two patterns given above, however, are likely to be a simplified version of the actual course of the progress of the foodsemic changes discussed here because, in fact, the actual progress of change may prompt us to propose and formulate other alternative paths:



As to the latter schema, one may generalize and say that a lexical item that at some point of its history is linked to the category **FOODSTUFFS** may develop, via metaphor, a sense related directly to the category **FEMALE HUMAN BEING** and, simultaneously, or at a later stage, via metonymy, i.e. it may metonymically start to be related to the target domain category **FEMALE PRIVY PARTS**. This kind of transfer of senses likely took place in the 16th century in the case of such words as *meat* and *mutton*. Yet, the development may have taken a different course, because the sense linked to the category **FEMALE PRIVY PARTS** may have developed historically prior to the female-specific sense, such as ‘woman’, ‘attractive girl’, ‘prostitute’, etc. The development of such food-specific lexical items as *beef*, *fish* and *oyster* has taken the metonymically conditioned development path from the sense ‘vagina’ to ‘a woman’.

Interestingly, the 16th century transfers targeted at the macrocategory **HUMAN BEING** enable us to distinguish two accompanying, if not simultaneous, types of change. This time we are talking about axiological changes, traditionally referred to in the literature as amelioration and pejoration (see, for example, Stern (1931), Klepanski (1990)). In such cases of transfer there is a certain alteration of the axiological load associated with the semantics of a given lexical item.³ In the body

³ See the types of pejoration and amelioration of meaning distinguished in Klepanski (1990).

of the data specified for the 16th century, we find only two cases of amelioration. The change affected the semantics of *duck*, which, apart from the neutral sense ‘a water bird’, started to be employed as a general term of affection and acquired the sense ‘a lover, a sweetheart’. The process of amelioration has also affected the history of *oyster*, the development of which took the direction from ‘a kind of seafood’ to ‘vagina’ and later in the course of its semantic evolution to ‘a prostitute’ and to ‘a young/attractive woman, girl’ between the 16th and the 17th century. The reverse process, much more frequent, that is pejoration or worsening of meaning, has operated in the case of *mutton*, *pheasant*, *quail*, *pullet*, *hare*, *crab* and *herring*, which involved transfers most frequently targeted at one of the subcategories of the macrocategory **HUMAN BEING**, that is **FEMALE HUMAN BEING**, where the most frequent tendency on the evaluative scale is from neutral food name to ‘a prostitute’, as in the case of *mutton*, *pheasant*, *quail*, *pullet* and *hare*. Two lexical items, *crab* and *herring*, are exceptions here as they did not acquire female-specific secondary senses, and are not gender-specific. The former is still used in reference to a sour or ill-tempered person, and the latter used to stand for a foolish, offensive or inconsequential person.

It is also worth mentioning that numerous lexical items are linked to the category **MALE PRIVY PARTS**. These shifts may be grouped into two meaning categories, where metaphorical senses such as ‘penis’ (e.g. *carrot*, *meat*, *nut*, *pudding*) and ‘testicle’ (*cod*) are the result of figurative extensions based on the general schema <MALE PRIVY PARTS ARE PERCEIVED AS A FOOD ITEM>. Interestingly, male-oriented figurative extensions are mostly restricted to the two abovementioned meanings, and the conceptual category **MALE HUMAN BEING**, is not so rich in various paths of development as the category **FEMALE HUMAN BEING**.

Let us point one more time to the general schemas that may be formulated as <HUMAN BEING IS/IS PERCEIVED AS A FOOD ITEM>, <FEMALE/MALE HUMAN BEING IS/IS PERCEIVED AS A FOOD ITEM> and <FEMALE/MALE BODY/PRIVY PARTS ARE PERCEIVED AS A FOOD ITEM> following Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) theory. In order to delve into the nature of figurative extensions we shall make use of the notion of conceptual domains such as the **DOMAIN OF SHAPE** [...], the **DOMAIN OF SMELL** [...], the **DOMAIN OF CONSISTENCY** [...] which are helpful in grasping and formulating the course of foodsemic transfers. Within the model adopted here lexical meaning can be accounted for by means of highlighting various attributive values that may be specified for conceptual domains. For example, for the **DOMAIN OF TASTE** [...] one may specify such attributive values as [BITTER], [SWEET], [SOUR], while the **DOMAIN OF CONSISTENCY** [...] presupposes attributive values including [SPONGEY], [DRY], [STICKY], [SMOOTH], [EVEN], [UNEVEN], [LOOSE] or [LUMPY].

In the case of the apparatus employed here, it may be claimed that, for instance, in the rise of secondary female-related senses of *fish* the attributive element from

the **DOMAIN OF SMELL** [...] was activated, as female privy parts are commonly associated with unpleasant scent, hence the value [SMELLY] and [FISHY] may be thought to have been responsible for their emergence. Similarly, in the case of *oyster* one may speak of the presence of the value [SMELLY]/[FISHY]; however, it seems that here the **DOMAIN OF CONSISTENCY** [...] could have been the leading trigger with the value [SMOOTH], [WETTISH], [MOIST] being at work. In the case of the development of *carrot*, employed in reference to the penis, one may speak of activation of values from the **DOMAIN OF VISUAL CHARACTERISTICS** [...] namely [LONG], [ON THE LONG SIDE].

4. Concluding remarks

Several times it has been indicated that food occupies a special position in our lives. It is thought to have certain powers such as nourishment and healing potential, and, all in all, it possesses a symbolic meaning. However, what is of great importance for us, it may be theoretically viewed as being linked to various source domains and a variety of metaphorical senses. The closeness and familiarity of elements of the conceptual category **FOOD** may be thought to make it a natural and subconsciously employed source of metaphorical extensions.

The 16th century witnessed a particular quantitative rise in the amount of foodsemic metaphors and metonymies. To be specific, 22 lexical items were subject to metaphorization processes at that time (*capon, duck, hare, pheasant, pigeon, pullet, quail, beef, meat, mutton, marrow, mutton, cod, fish, herring, oyster, carrot, lentils, nut, nuts, pie* and *pudding*). The capacity of metaphorization in the domain of foodstuffs in the informal register of English shows that frequently females and their body parts may serve as the ground for various extensions where the source domain is the semantic area of a foodstuff item, and the target domain is either female (*hare, pheasant, pigeon, pullet, quail, beef, mutton, fish, oyster, pie*) or female body part (*beef, mutton, fish, oyster, nuts, pie, pudding*). Names of foodstuffs may be used in reference to human sexual organs, and all the characteristics that metaphorically are attributable to them. The general metaphorical schemas that arise, that is <HUMAN BEING IS/IS PERCEIVED AS A FOOD ITEM> and <FEMALE/MALE PRIVY PARTS ARE/ARE PERCEIVED AS A FOOD ITEM> are manifested in numerous historically documented foodsemic extensions. Consequently, such categories as **ATTRACTIVE/IMMORAL FEMALE HUMAN BEING, FEMALE PRIVY PARTS**, as well as **MALE PRIVY PARTS** are very productive in terms of foodsemic transfers.

The data drawn from various lexicographic sources enable us to formulate a general conclusion that the majority of foodsemic developments are based on and are triggered by extralinguistic factors, various associations evoked by certain food items, their characteristics and sensory experiences related to them.

Hence attributive values and several dimensions may be said to form the basis of transfers of food words. They include, among others, the **DOMAIN OF SHAPE** [LONGISH], and the **DOMAIN OF CONSISTENCY** [WETTISH], [WET] or [FROZEN].

Having scrutinized the material gathered here one may conclude that the mechanism of metaphor and metonymy is naturally present, common and widespread. What is more, numerous metaphorical transfers are closely related and conditioned by extralinguistic characteristics, conditions and conditionings; the productivity of a given foodsemic type transfer is frequently triggered by extralinguistic knowledge, familiarity and associations with a certain type of food and its characteristics.

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