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# The semiotics of migrants' food: Between codes and experience

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**Abstract:** This paper sets out to analyze cultural semiotics of migrants' food and culinary practices. Moving from the perspective of the Tartu school of semiotics, which views culture both as a grammar (a set of codes) and as a set of texts, food can be characterized as a specific cultural element where grammar and text (code and experience) are woven together. International migrants live one or more ruptures and changes in their status quo due to their adaptation to the receiving country, which puts their cultural habits into questions. In this framework, even "normal" and well-established culinary practices might need to change. In this relation, I claim that it is on the basis of migrants' new experience abroad that it is possible to change culinary grammars. In order to move beyond a descriptive account of change, and understand the reasons why migrants construct a new semiotics of food, this paper also integrates elements from argumentation theory in order to analyze the reasons given by migrants to explain the changes they are making. The analysis proposed here is based on a corpus of interviews to migrating mothers of different origins, all living in the greater London area.

**Keywords:** food, international migration, grammar, texts, transition, argumentation

## 1 Introduction

Alexandra is a Canadian woman of Chinese descent, who was born in Vietnam and migrated to Canada with her parents when she was a child. On the day of her wedding in 2007, she opts for a white wedding gown for the ceremony. By the time the bride leaves for a reception with her family and friends, she has changed into a traditional Chinese red dress. Alexandra had two different cultural codes to choose from: white versus red, "Western" versus "Chinese" and so on. What she ended up with was a unique *bricolage* (Levi-Strauss 1966 [1962]; see also Zittoun 2006) of codes based on her experience as an international migrant.

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What does this episode tell us? The experience of migrants is particularly suited to observe how cultural codes are modified and changed through experience. This is true for different cultural elements, food being a representative one. In fact, it is fairly evident that food is “part of a sign system imbued with culture-specific connotations” (Danesi 2006: 533), and not only a means for nourishment. In growing up in a given context, one gets in touch with one or more cultural communities and their food systems. In this sense, there is some degree of bricolage relative to each and every human being (Greco Morasso and Zittoun 2014), because all individuals have multiple belongings to different cultural communities (Rigotti 2005). For international migrants, however, meeting other food systems is emphasized, because they encounter new people, and habits, and are therefore more pervasively confronted with otherness; this might put their original food system(s) into question and possibly induce change. Generally speaking, intercultural encounters with other people are events that may generate change in a person’s view over other cultures (Byram et al. 2009; Greco Morasso and Barrett 2012). Therefore, studying the semiotics of migrants’ food offers an opportunity to see how change in food and culinary traditions might happen, as well as how their value as semiotic systems might be modified.

This paper addresses these questions basing on a theory of cultural semiotics and integrating it with insights from cultural psychology and argumentation theory. The paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, the Tartu approach to the semiotics of culture is discussed in relation to food. Section 3 analyzes how food can change in the experience of international migrants, framing such experience in terms of cultural psychology in general, and of *ruptures* and *transition* processes in particular. After this theoretical discussion, the empirical corpus on which the analysis is based is presented in Section 4, alongside some methodological remarks about how data have been analyzed. The main findings are discussed in Section 5, while Section 6 proposes some conclusions while at the same time highlighting those aspects which invite further research.

## 2 Food and culture: Between grammar and (hyper)text

The theoretical framework in which the present research is situated moves from the approach to cultural semiotics proposed by the Tartu school

(Lotman and Uspenskij 1973; Lotman et al. 1978). In such approach, culture is defined as a social, communitarian phenomenon; more precisely, culture is the *nonhereditary memory of the community* (Lotman et al. 1978: 213). In this sense, culture is like a cradle which welcomes baby humans, making the world both understandable and familiar to them (Rigotti 2005). A similar perspective on culture is adopted in some studies in cultural psychology; in the words of Zittoun (in press), children's "environments do not only provide them with food and warmth, but also with lullabies, rhymes and fairy tales."

In a semiotic perspective, culture is seen as a system, whose model is natural languages – which in fact are part and parcel of cultures (see the synthesis about the Tartu school of semiotics discussed in Gatti 2003). The semiotic interpretation of cultures presents us with two main aspects, analogously to what happens with languages. On the one hand, cultures are codes, or *grammars*. Similarly to what happens with natural languages, the code-dimension of culture allows us to understand the world, by categorizing it and giving a name to the various aspects of our experience. In the words of Lotman et al. (1978: 213), a natural language provides members of a community with "their intuitive sense of structuredness" thanks to "its transformation of the 'open' world of realia into a 'closed' world of names." In this sense, culture is "the generator of structuredness" (1978: 213). Speaking of food, culinary traditions entail grammars structuring ingredients in a certain way and telling you what is edible, in which form it is so (e. g., cooked or uncooked), how to put ingredients together, whether and how to season them, when to eat them, and so on. There are also rituals, rules of etiquette concerning how to consume food as well as table-manner codes (Danesi 2006: 533). Different codes might even bring, sometimes, to incomprehension or to misunderstandings. For example, Lehrer (1991: 392) describes a cultural misunderstanding due to different interpretations of what serving a cold meal to guests means in terms of hospitality.

On the other hand, culture encompasses a series of *texts*, which constitute the common memory of a certain community. Texts are a community's take on reality, i. e., they are shared *experiences*. Rigotti (2005) observes that cultural texts can be verbal, such as foundational texts, like constitutions, literary texts and other documents at the origin of a community (see Gobber and Palmieri 2014 for the discussion of a Swiss foundational text relative to the first Federal pact between Cantons). These texts might be non-verbal as well, such as paintings, statues, architectural words, or other parts of what is sometimes called *material culture*. The different foundational texts of a given community are often interrelated in a hyper-textual manner, by explicit or implicit links

(Danesi and Rocci 2009: 145). In the case of food, a community's hypertext is alive because of a tradition which is continuously nourished by individuals' personal texts. These latter comprise all those personal and communal episodes which stay in our memory. It might be that pizza eaten in Naples, or that cheese fondue tasted in Neuchâtel; it might be the food *and* the family or friends we have been eating with, because the experience of food is tightly related to sharing with family and members of the community. The experiential nature of food as linked to conviviality is pictured in an exemplary fashion in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, when this author describes a traditional Christmas dinner by the Cratchit family, who represent the working class. The unity and joy of the Cratchits is pictured around the cooking and eating of a sumptuous and most celebrated goose and a Christmas pudding. Just to quote a few relevant lines:

Master Peter, and the two ubiquitous young Cratchits went to fetch the goose, with which they soon returned in high procession.

Such a bustle ensued that you might have thought a goose the rarest of all birds; a feathered phenomenon, to which a black swan was a matter of course – and in truth it was something very like it in that house. Mrs Cratchit made the gravy (ready beforehand in a little saucepan) hissing hot; Master Peter mashed the potatoes with incredible vigor; Miss Belinda sweetened up the apple-sauce; Martha dusted the hot plates; Bob took Tiny Tim beside him in a tiny corner at the table; the two young Cratchits set chairs for everybody, not forgetting themselves, and mounting guard upon their posts, crammed spoons into their mouths, lest they should shriek for goose before their turn came to be helped. At last the dishes were set on, and grace was said. It was succeeded by a breathless pause, as Mrs Cratchit, looking slowly all along the carving-knife, prepared to plunge it in the breast; but when she did, and when the long expected gush of stuffing issued forth, one murmur of delight arose all round the board, and even Tiny Tim, excited by the two young Cratchits, beat on the table with the handle of his knife, and feebly cried Hurrah.

There never was such a goose. Bob said he didn't believe there ever was such a goose cooked. Its tenderness and flavor, size and cheapness, were the themes of universal admiration. (Dickens 1843)

Food, thus, both has elements of a grammar and is imbued with textual experiences. This however gives us a rather static picture of food as a cultural system. Studying how migrants use food will enable us to make this picture dynamic and understand processes of change. This is what we are going to do in Section 3 in theory, and in the following section via an empirical analysis.

### 3 Texts might change grammar, experience might change codes

Lotman and Uspenskij observe that some cultural elements, like fashion, are structurally oriented towards change. Fashion “always tries to become the norm,” but as soon as fashion is stabilized as a norm “it quickly seeks to abandon it” (Lotman et al. 1978: 225). On the contrary, other cultural systems are oriented towards the past, in that they do not foresee any possible change to their rules, thus being focused on tradition and imagining future as a mere projection of the past (1978: 215). This is often the case with culinary traditions, where recipes tell you how to do things, with change not being normally foreseen (see also Danesi 2006: 538).

Accounting for change with food, thus, is not a matter of simple evolution of the system, but it happens because culinary systems are adaptive to contexts (Danesi 2006: 538). This remark brings us close to what is the main claim of this paper; namely, that *food systems change and develop adapting to experience*. In order to study change, in this paper, international migrants will be considered as a case in point of how experience brings to change and of its consequences on food codes. The hypothesis advanced in this study is that one possible catalyst for change of grammars and codes for migrants is the experience of cooking and consuming food. From a semiotic viewpoint, it is texts that change grammars, and this is particularly evident in the case of migrants who face a new experience.

Now, the approach to cultural semiotics developed by the Tartu school (see preceding section) is focused on cultural communities and what culture means to a community is the basic phenomenon observed. In this paper, however, such approach is integrated with a more micro-approach to how individuals – and, particularly, migrants – live change and justify it, thus innovating semiotic systems through their experience.

More precisely, in a perspective of socio-cultural psychology, international migration can be seen as entailing one or more *ruptures* in the life of a migrant (Kadianaki 2010; Lutz 2013). Ruptures concern, for example, language understanding, or a person's personal and professional projects, which might be difficult to realize in a different country; or again, there might be important and painful ruptures at the interpersonal level, for example because one leaves some family behind (Lutz 2013). In order to respond to change which has occurred in their life course, migrants activate processes of *transition* in which they adjust and engage in processes of meaning-making (Zittoun 2006). Transition processes follow a rupture, when an individual aims at making sense of the new situation or environment, and

are defined as processes of developmental change, which are generative of new ranges of possible conduct. They do not prevent a person from maintaining a sense of continuity and consistency within her experience, despite some degree of uncertainty that is normally associated to moments of change (Zittoun 2006: 4). The corpus on which this paper is based concerns *migrant women with children*. The rationale for combining migration and motherhood lies in the fact that both constitute potential ruptures in the life of a person. Albeit both can be positive, and so might be their combination, all this certainly requires some degree of adaptation and makes the experience of *change* more emphasized. Depending on different circumstances, these two spheres of experience may support each other, the one providing a sense of continuity to the other (as suggested by Zittoun and Grossen 2013); or they might be perceived as two synchronous ruptures which to some extent magnify each other's dilemmas (cf. Tummala-Narra 2004; Sigad and Eisikovits 2009).

In order to capture the adaptations a person lives during a transition process, Zittoun (2012) proposes to consider three lines of change: processes of identity definition, processes of sense-making, linked to how a person evaluates the situation and her transition process; finally, processes of learning. Zittoun and Perret-Clermont (2002) qualify learning as acquiring new knowledge and social, cognitive and practical skills. The approach of cultural psychology considers how cultural artefacts and other *symbolic resources* guide individuals in their transition processes. Symbolic resources constitute a sort of semiotic GPS guiding people in their search for adaptation. In particular, Greco Morasso and Zittoun (2014) discuss how food serves as a malleable symbolic resource to crystallize and give a material support to migrants' changing identities.

Ruptures and transitions are always experienced by a person (Zittoun 2006: 6), thus they vary *individually* and depend on how a person perceives ruptures and what her individual processes of identity definition, learning and sense-making are. The perspective of cultural psychology, thus, privileges an *individual's view* on the phenomenon of change. For example, De Abreu et al. (2012) describe the individual transition processes of two Portuguese sisters who lived seemingly identical migration trajectories to the UK. The two sisters their use of symbolic resources at the social and cognitive level is unique and personal and so is, ultimately, their personal transition processes. Because transition processes are personal, it is important that, in order to analyze change in this paper, the Tartu approach to cultural semiotics is integrated with a view on how individuals live change in their experience of food as a cultural element.

Moreover, going against – or just slightly modifying – a cultural code, as it might become necessary for a migrant (for example, for lack of the right ingredients) is something that goes against the *status quo* and, therefore,

requires justification. A migrant who needs to replace an ingredient, or leave out something of a well-established recipe, or again integrate elements from another cultural system will be possibly brought to reflect on the value of such elements for her; she will be invited to reflect and give reasons for any change she is making to food, conviviality and culinary traditions as semiotic systems.

Therefore, I will also claim that the unique personal bricolage that a migrant will be constructing will equally bring her to reflect on her non-default choices and advance reasons for changes she made. In such process of justification, argumentation – i. e., the reasons given to explain one's decisions – is tightly bound to change in the semiotic system, as culinary ingredients and their combination become symbolic elements, thus entering the *semiosphere* (Lotman 2005 [1984]). This is in line with what Lotman et al. 1978: 211–212) observe when they say that any change of culture is significantly associated to an increase in semiotic behavior. In our case, this will mean that elements of a cultural tradition increase in their semiotic value and are transformed within a migrant's unique bricolage.

## 4 On the corpus and methodology

The data considered in this paper have been collected in the framework of the project “Migrants in transition: an argumentative perspective,” funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (PBTIP1–133595, 2010–2012). The project focused on the migrants' reported inner dialogue in the perspective of their processes of transition. Twenty-nine mothers of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds (aged 25 to 50) have been interviewed about their experience of international migration. At the time of the study, the interviewees had been living in the greater London area for a time span ranging from 1 to 22 years. The interviews lasted from 32 to 90 minutes (average: 60.89 recorded min); they were all transcribed according to the standards of argumentative analysis (for a discussion on the criteria applied, see Greco Morasso 2011).

The interviewees have been selected through four main channels. Some of them answered to online posts; the large part of this group of respondents found a message on the Noticeboard or on the “Meet a Mum” board provided by the website Netmums,<sup>1</sup> while one answered to a message on the social network SistaTalk.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Founded in 2000, Netmums is the UK's fastest-growing online parenting organization with over half a million members, mostly mums” (<http://www.netmums.co.uk>).

<sup>2</sup> Sistatalk (<http://www.sistatalk.co.uk>) is “the leading niche social networking site from the National Black Women's Network.”

Other respondents were recruited at the toddler reading group of a local library in a London borough characterized by a high level of ethnic diversity. Further contacts were made via direct or indirect personal contacts. Finally, there has been some snowballing effect. Yet snowballing and personal contacts were kept to a minimum to secure enough diversity in the respondents' social networks.

This sample was largely made up of educated (or highly educated), often middle-class women; they all spoke fluent English and the majority of them could easily have access to the Internet. This has guaranteed a certain uniformity of the sample. At the same time, the respondents were diverse in terms of linguistic, ethnic and cultural origin, number of children, work-family balance, and family status.

From a methodological point of view, the study of migrants' processes of transition is supported, in general, by in-depth reconstructive interviews. Via this method, individuals reconstruct how they lived a moment of rupture and the following transition a posteriori (cf. Zittoun 2009: 415). Considering the data emerged from this type of interviews from a discourse analytical perspective permits to analyze the individuals' decision-making processes, including internal differences of opinion and their resolution. Interviews are a basic method in the study of migration as well, with human geographers paying increasing attention to the discourse structures and how people convey their meanings (Davies and Dwyer 2007).

The analysis presented in this paper will be focused on two representative cases. The methodology of semiotic analysis will be centered on the perspective of the Tartu school of semiotics as outlined in Sections 2 and 3, thus paying particular attention to how codes change. Moreover, I will be integrating an argumentative analysis of the *reasons* given by migrants for the changes they make to their routine culinary practices. The integration of an argumentative analysis is particularly important because it supports a dynamic view of changes in the semiotics of culture and goes beyond a descriptive approach to the semiotics of migrants' food. In fact, by analyzing the reasons why, say, a certain dish is cooked or composed in a given way, one can really understand if there is some change with respect to what would be a default practice and see in which direction the *trajectory of food* (Greco Morasso and Zittoun 2014) is going. For the argumentative analysis, I will rely on the Argumentum Model of Topics (AMT, Rigotti and Greco Morasso 2009, 2010), which allows discussing implicit cultural premises as well as loci or principles of reasoning on which migrants' arguments are based (Danesi and Rocci 2009). For reasons of space, I will show how the AMT permits to analyze inferential processes when using it for the analysis (Section 5).



## 5 Discussion

In this section, I will discuss two particularly representative cases of how food codes change according to a migrant's transition process (Sections 5.1 and 5.2 respectively). These two cases will be analyzed in terms of the categories proposed by the Tartu school of semiotics (Section 2) and, when needed, compared to other cases from the same corpus. Their decisions about what type of food to cook will be then analyzed from an argumentative viewpoint, focusing on the inferential process in particular. A focus on inference and, in particular, on the implicit premises hidden behind the speakers' words will reveal their cultural values and what they care for. This explains changes in food codes not only from the perspective of systemic change but also taking into account decisions and goals in human interaction and communication (Danesi and Rocci 2009).

The two cases are different under several respects. Hilaria, who is from the Philippines, is married to an Englishman, while Mary and her husband are both South African. Hilaria and Mary are both mothers of two, yet Mary's children are younger than Hilaria's; the latter has been living in the UK for almost twenty years at the time of the interview, while Mary has been there for about six years and, while planning to ask for British citizenship soon, she still does not have an English passport when she is interviewed. For Hilaria, being a Catholic is a significant part of her experience, while Mary attends services at a local Anglican church. Mary is self-employed and works as a physiotherapist, while Hilaria has been a housewife for more than a decade. In view of these differences, it is interesting to see how food practices change in two transition processes which are at different stages.

### 5.1 Hilaria from the Philippines

The first case analyzed is that of Hilaria, born in 1966 and migrated to the UK in 1992 after marrying a Londoner whom she had met before while being in the UK for a shorter time in her youth as a part of a student exchange program. Hilaria and her husband have always lived in London ever since, and they have two children, a boy of sixteen and a girl of eleven at the time of the interview (March 2011). Hilaria is an educated woman, who decided to stop working to devote her time to the upbringing of her children, which she does with a reflective attitude and specific goals in mind, such as raising them in both the English and the Filipino culture. Extract 1 presents the part of her interview in which, answering to an explicit question, Hilaria describes culinary practices in her family.

## Extract 1

- Sara 1 And sorry what about your household you cook =  
 Hilaria 2 = Filipino food?  
 Sara 3 Always yeah okay  
 Hilaria 4 Ahm English food when I came here there permanently so ninety two there wasn't a lot of (.)  
 5 Filipino South East Asian ingredients in the groceries like in Sainsbury's<sup>3</sup> (.) but now you can  
 6 get more so it's easier (.) so I thought how will I survive without all these things there is a  
 7 Filipino: there are Filipino shops in Earls Court<sup>4</sup> (.) and we used to live in ( ) so it was easy so  
 8 Henry would get rice from there and hh but now you could even get Jasmine or (.) the sort of  
 9 rice WE cook in the groceries whereas before you had to go to Chinatown or to the special  
 10 shops (.) so I've made (.) when I came it's funny because I had ideal meals cookbook (.) and  
 11 I went through it and I got recipes from there and that's how I learnt to cook English food (.)  
 12 and then there was a year I subscribed to Good Food magazine so: to increase my etcetera  
 13 but now it's ( ) because it's easy to get these ingredients so I could cook Filipino and I could  
 14 cook (.) hh [English]  
 Sara 15 [and that's important to you and for the children  
 Hilaria 16 Oh the children love Filipino food (.) so: it's important that they love rice so they like how  
 17 we eat (laughing)  
 Sara 18 And what would you have for example as a typical:/  
 Hilaria 19 As a typical eh oh I don't know because most English families would have would serve the  
 20 food (.) individually on the plate and here's your (.) plate with food (.) when you have a meal  
 21 (.) whereas we would have everything in front and everybody helps himself (.) so like in a  
 22 Chinese restaurant when you have everything (.) and then people just help themselves and  
 23 that's how I would do it at home (.) ah on a typical day I would have either rice or potatoes  
 24 and some meat dish or fish dish (.) but it's not eh (2) but we (.) we don't eat rice every day  
 25 so:: we'd have pasta sometimes (.) and: potatoes

A first aspect that clearly emerges in extract 1 is Hilaria dealing with two different culinary grammars – Filipino food and English food. While she has learnt the former in her youth, she meets the latter code as she gets married to Henry and moves to London. Both grammars present Hilaria with difficulties concerning how to put them into practice. In the first place, when she moves to London in the early 90s, Filipino ingredients are difficult to find in local groceries (lines 4–9). Thus she needs her husband going to the city center at Earls Court or Chinatown (lines 7–9) to get Jasmine rice and other ingredients – “the sort of rice WE cook,” as she puts it at lines 8–9.

Hilaria's difficulty with the English culinary tradition instead is that she does not know it, nor do her husband and mother-in-law appear to have had a role in her learning to cook English recipes, although such effort to learn significantly

<sup>3</sup> Founded in 1869, Sainsbury's is one of the UK biggest grocery chains.

<sup>4</sup> Earl's Court (London borough of Kensington and Chelsea) is known for Filipino restaurants and shops.

characterizes Hilaria's transition process. Hilaria learns from written sources, which represent the codification of culinary grammars (Greco Morasso and Zittoun 2014), namely, a cookbook in the first place and then a popular magazine (BBC Good Food) to which she makes a subscription for one year. Written recipes crystallize grammars and their promise is that, if you follow instructions, you will get to an authentic experience of a certain culinary tradition. And yet, as anyone who has tried to encounter a new cuisine simply by following a written recipe knows, this is as difficult as learning a language only through reading a grammar book. In this case however, albeit Hilaria does not mention it, she has had her husband and the surrounding environment to guide her trials and give her some feedback about the English food she cooks. Learning to cook English food is presented by Hilaria as something necessary in order to compensate for the lack of Filipino ingredients in London; however, because this condition has been improving with the passing of years (lines 5–6 and 13), Hilaria feels it is easier to cook Filipino and English today.

In her attempt to adapt codes to her experience as a migrant, Hilaria builds a personal bricolage of grammars which is most especially reflected in how she alternates rice (Filipino) with potatoes or pasta (non-Filipino, or “English,” see lines 24–35). Pasta is hardly a typically English ingredient, indeed; but cooking some pasta is part of the eclectic international cuisine which is widespread in the UK. In the words of the now ubiquitously cited British celebrity cook Jamie Oliver:

As I wrote this book, I found I was constantly debating with myself exactly what the term “British food” means. Walk down any British high street and it's clear to see that our food embraces much more than a handful of old recipes. Our history has been one of invasion, exploration, colonization and immigration, and the evidence of that is everywhere: in our plates, in our supermarkets and in our cupboards. Some of the things we now think of as quintessentially British actually arrived long ago with immigrants carving out new lives here. (Oliver 2011)

Therefore, it is not unlikely that Hilaria will have found many of her pasta recipes, say, in her English Good Food magazine. In a search made in June 2014, the website of BBC Good Food (<http://www.bbcgoodfood.com>) returned 443 recipes containing the word *pasta*, to which we have to possibly add other recipes containing more specific words, which only in part result in the search with “pasta” (e. g., *spaghetti*, 92 occurrences; *lasagne*, 36 occurrences; *penne*, 43 occurrences, and so on). Adding potatoes and pasta to the default choice of rice, thus, is a way for Hilaria to adapt her code to her experience of life in the UK.

Another aspect of Hilaria's bricolage is that, even when she cooks English food, she seems to prefer serving it as this would be done in the Philippines,

namely, with dishes put in the middle of the dinner table with everyone serving him/herself from a common plate. She explicitly contrasts this custom with what “most English families” would do, i.e., serving food portioned on individual plates already (lines 18–23). This represents another grammatical aspect which separates the two countries, at least as Hilaria sees it. In order to explain her way of doing things to her European<sup>5</sup> interviewer, Hilaria recalls how food is served in Chinese restaurants (lines 21–22).

Hilaria’s personal bricolage tells us about how the experience of migration produces changes in individuals’ life that somehow invite or even force them to modify their cultural codes, for lack of the “right” ingredients. What is most interesting, however, is the entrance of rice into the semiosphere. In the Philippines, Hilaria might have eaten rice because this is a largely available produce, the preference for specific varieties of rice also largely depending on geographical availability. But when Hilaria settles in London she looks for the rice she would eat at home and picks it up within a much broader paradigm of alternatives including other types of rice as well as other foods which serve the same function of providing some basic carbohydrate intake. Rice becomes then a *sign* of what is normally eaten in the Philippines, a marker of Filipino food and a way to preserve her culture. The same happens to the way of serving food – one common plate in the middle of the table, with people serving themselves – which is natural in her home country but becomes an explicit choice as her husband and her set up a family in the UK.

Notably, Hilaria seems aware of the semiotic implications of the choices she has made for herself as well as for the people she is eating with, most especially her children, whom she wants to pass down her original culture to. Eating rice and presenting food on a common plate, thus, become part of her approach to children’s multicultural upbringing in her mixed marriage, thus serving as a semiotic vehicle to pass her experience down to them. Food is part of a more complex strategy, which emerges in other parts of this interview; for example, Hilaria also mentions consciously raising children as bilingual and bringing them “home” twice a year in order for them to see how life is in the Philippines.

Hilaria makes her semiotic use of food explicit at lines 16–17, responding to an interviewer’s question (line 15) about whether the choices she makes are important for her and the children. She responds by asserting that her children have well responded to her cultural upbringing (“Oh the children love Filipino food”) and reasserting the main reason why she made her choices, though

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5 The interviewer in this project is Italian by origin, but she has spent several years in Switzerland and, at the time of the interview, she had been living in the UK for about eighteen months.

mitigating it with laughter: “It’s important that they love rice so they like how we eat.” At line 17 (and at line 9 above) she uses the personal pronoun “we” to refer to her community of origin in the Philippines, despite her status as a long-term migrant settled in the UK for good.

From an argumentative point of view, Hilaria’s remark might be read as an argumentation in which she analyzes the relation between “loving rice” and “liking how they eat in the Philippines.” Mary claims that loving rice on the part of her children is important because so they like how people eat in the Philippines. Following the Argumentum Model of Topics, we might say that this reasoning partly involves a means-end argumentation (*locus from final cause*, see Rigotti 2008), because that her children like how people eat in the Philippines is certainly a goal in Hilaria’s way of bringing them up. At the same time, however, she also describes a part-whole relationship between loving food and liking Filipino food in general, whereby rice is implicitly deemed as the “core” of Filipino food, which is in line with what she says in 8–10 and 23. Therefore, that her children appreciate rice means that Hilaria has reached the core part of her goal, namely, to make them love her traditional cuisine. Argumentation in this case, thus, rests on a combination of reasoning on goals and instruments; and reflecting on a part-whole relation, with rice being understood as the core element in Filipino food for this participant.

## 5.2 Mary from South Africa

The second case concerns Mary, a South African mother of two young children (a boy of ten and a girl of four at the time of the interview). Mary is married to a South-African; she owns a private practice as a physiotherapist in one of the London suburbs. Mary and her husband migrated to London when they already had a first child, and then they had a daughter in London. The main reason why they left South Africa is quality of life, as in their case working in the UK has meant being able to be financially more secure and at the same time devoting more time to their children (for a more detailed discussion on this case, see Greco Morasso submitted). At the time of the interview (September 2010), Mary’s family has been in the UK for more than five years and they are about to ask for British citizenship, although they do not completely exclude the possibility of going back to South Africa at some point, should quality of life there change substantially. As in Hilaria’s case, Mary talks about her food practices as she answers to an explicit question by the interviewer (lines 1–2 in Extract 2).

## Extract 2

- Sara 1 Yes (.) and: I mean for example how are you cooking in terms of (.) your (.) for example of  
2 your cooking practice
- Mary 3 We (.) ah do all the South African things ( ) the South African calls a barbecue  
4 (.) a braai (.) and our neighbors would be thinking we're mad because (.) my  
5 husband loves (.) cooking and braaing and (.) you know even yesterday he lighted a fire (.) and  
6 it was raining
- Sara 7 Yes in fact I was thinking (both laughing)
- Mary 8 And: yesterday we did the barbecue (.) but he did what's called then the potjie so a black  
9 African pot that you put over (.) on the fire and you cook in that like (.) almost like a stew or a  
10 casserole kind of dish so we still do (.) cook South African dishes (.) or traditional stuff (.)  
11 'cause we like 'cause we've grown up with that so:
- Sara 12 Yes (.) so: does it have a: a meaning to you
- Mary 13 It is! (laughing)
- Sara 14 So your children when they go to school they eat English things I suppose
- Mary 15 Well (.) their school I mean doesn't have a cooked meal so: they get packed lunch but: they've  
16 grown up with that even to the extent that (.) ehm they like everything (.) they eat everything  
17 we eat (.) including good example as well that British people don't know at all well something  
18 called biltong which is dried meat (.) and doesn't get cooked it's dried and put special spices  
19 ( ) and when when it's hard (.) you cut that into slices or whatever and (.) there's a fight in the  
20 house as for who's getting and how many pieces 'cause they love that and that's very South  
21 African ah: so: yes no they're fond and also an another good example is ah: they're both fond  
22 of (.) drunk rooibos tea which is a natural (.) ah ehm tea with with (.) no caffeine (.) no caffeine  
23 so okay it's something ya in the UK at Sainsbury's they sell it it's called (.) they called it the  
24 red bush tea (.) but that's a South African tea so yes all the- all our (.) things like that (.) we  
25 still do all of them (.) but eh a lot of the South African produce is (.) available in the UK is ehm  
26 (.) in shops (.) and the ( ) is quite close in (name of the place) so: (laughing) everything we  
27 want we can buy =
- [...]
- Mary 28 =And also you know you had a lot of sort of (.) it's CULTURALLY (.) you know sitting  
29 around the fire and cooking in a black pot all of that you know that's so (.) we still manage to  
30 do that even though (.) to something else and to something (.) British barbecue is just a way to  
31 cooking food whereas to South Africans (.) that's what South Africans do with their family at  
32 the weekends it's far more: you know you you you light a fire and it mustn't be gas (laughing)  
33 we have to light a fire and that social I mean and you (.) socialize together you know  
34 with (.) friends and whatever and: that's the whole sort of days it's not just the cooking food
- Sara 35 And that sort I mean was this (.) ah:: a way also to meet other people from here or other South  
36 Africans (.) living here or (.) maybe also your neighbors (.) ( )
- Mary 37 Oh they look it and (.) you know sometimes that you know (.) other British people may be ( )  
38 are interested in (.) you know how we would do it or what we would cook on fire ( )
- Sara 39 Do you recall any episode of meeting people through this sort of particular
- Mary 40 Not really MEETING them because we invite people that we already know to our house ehm  
41 (.) well some of them literally (.) you know they they're always (.) there's always interest in  
42 things (laughing) and I'll always (.) you know if we are doing that then I'll always think well  
43 I'm gonna make something South African (.) as a side dish you know let also people so

- 44 EXPERIENCE (.) you know and then eh (.) they always said (.) quite positive comments I  
 45 don't know if they've just been polite (both laughing) but yes we make all type of (.) you know  
 46 not just cooking the meat for example for this example and having (.) cold stuff and potatoes  
 47 that you can buy at Sainsbury's but we can do (.) different things you know in a (.) South  
 48 African way

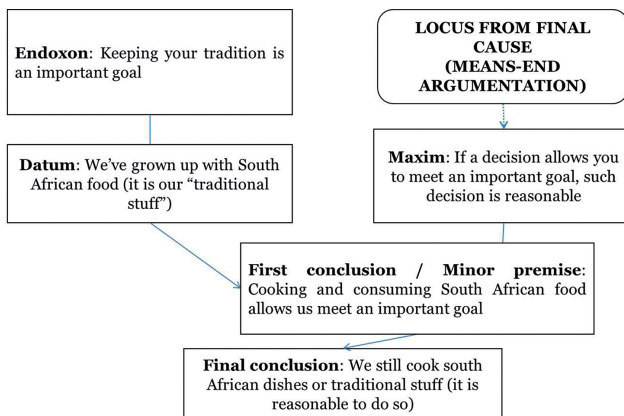
Differently from Hilaria, Mary and her husband are both South African. Their children, raised in the UK, meet English food prevailing in the outside environment, while Mary likes having South African food at home.

Mary presents her choice to cook South African dishes as natural, as if she was simply perpetuating her experience in a new place. A similar attitude has been found in other cases in this corpus, with several participants stating that they simply maintain their home traditions in the host country. Mary from France, for example, makes it explicit, saying that “when I enter in my home I am in a little France.” Mary also explains that she serves dinner at six, as many mothers in the UK would do, but earlier than she used to do in France. She reasons that she can do this because there is one hour difference between where she lived and London. So if she feeds the children at six, she reminds herself that it is seven in France and this is still in line with her tradition. All this would make us think of codes that are simply “packed into suitcases” and brought in a new country without any change. However, this is not the case, as Mary's story proves, because even sticking to a home country's cultural codes acquires a new meaning when one migrates elsewhere.

The apparently unchanged grammatical elements of South African culinary practices that Mary mentions are: *braai*, a form of barbecue which is typical of her home country (lines 3–8); cooking in a black *potjie* (lines 8–11) and consuming specific food items such as *biltong* (lines 18–21) and *roiboos* (red bush tea, lines 21–24). All these elements, which would be taken for granted in South Africa, acquire a specific semiotic meaning in the case of Mary's family. In fact, Mary's South African grammar only apparently remains unchanged. First, weather is different and contributes to generating funny episodes such as Mary's husband braaing in the garden under falling rain, much to the astonishment of their neighbors (lines 4–6). Second, the choice of South African food, if motivated on the basis of experience (“we've grown up with that,” line 11) is not obvious because it is not the default choice in a British country and the British are doing it differently (lines 30–31). Thus, it becomes a deliberate choice, a semiotic tool to keep faith to one's culture, as Mary says herself at line 28 (see the emphasis on “culturally”). What was a default way of eating food, thus, becomes a reasoned choice, whose main argument is presented at line 11: “‘cause we like ‘cause we've grown up with that.”

Notably, this dialogue about Mary’s choices is initiated by the interviewer’s question at lines 1–2 with no explicit preference for an argumentative discussion: “I mean for example how are you cooking in terms of (.) your (.) for example of your cooking practice.” Such question invites a description and the narrative presented by Mary to reply to such question is largely descriptive. However, as often found in this corpus (see Xenitidou and Greco Morasso 2014), participants reply by presenting the reasons for their choices even if not explicitly requested to do so. In this case, Mary ends up explaining the main reason of her decision. In the discussion with the interviewer, this might count as explanation rather than argumentation<sup>6</sup>. However, such explanation points at the reasons why she decided. Therefore what is explanation in the interviewer-interviewee dialogue, this hints to how Mary decided, namely, to her *inner argumentation* (Greco Morasso 2013).

We therefore have to approach argumentation in the cases considered as containing the justification of a decision which Mary has made to keep her traditions in cooking and consuming food. When Mary replies to the interviewer’s question, she first lists and describes the usual things she cooks (braaing and potjie, lines 2–10); so when she says “we still do (.) cook South African dishes (.) or traditional stuff” at line 10, “South African dishes or traditional stuff” serves as a device for semantically condensing (cf. Rigotti and Cigada 2013) the items which she has been discussing before. As anticipated above, the reason she presents for this decision is linked to her tradition: “‘cause we like ‘cause we’ve grown up with that” (line 11). Figure 1 presents an analysis of this argument on the basis of the Argumentum Model of Topics (Rigotti and Greco Morasso 2009, 2010).



**Figure 1:** AMT analysis of Mary’s argument about tradition.

<sup>6</sup> Argumentative loci are a tool which is useful to reconstruct not only argumentation but also other forms of reasoning, including inner reasoning, explanation, and inquiry (Rigotti and Greco Morasso forthcoming in preparation).



As said, Mary's intention is not simply to describe her way of cooking, but also to justify it as a reasonable decision. Therefore, her standpoint might be reconstructed as: "We still cook south African dishes or traditional stuff (it is reasonable to do so)." This argument is founded on Mary's goals – why she made her decision, what she wants to achieve by so doing – and, thus, it rests on the *locus from final cause* (Rigotti 2008). The locus from final cause, as any locus, does not directly intervene in the inferential configuration of arguments. In other words, loci are not immediate constituents of argument schemes. Rather, they represent the principle of support (in terms of Garsen 2001) linking arguments to their standpoint. Loci are the basis on which the *procedural component* of argument schemes is founded (Rigotti and Greco Morasso 2010). In particular, different *maxims* can be drawn from each locus, each representing an "if ... then" inferential connection working as a major premise in the argumentation. In the argument represented in Figure 1, the relevant maxim is "If a decision allows you to meet an important goal, such decision is reasonable." The maxim, taken together with the minor premise, activates a syllogistic procedure which allows to draw a Final conclusion. Such conclusion obviously coincides with the standpoint to be defended, as arguments count as inferential moves backing up standpoints.

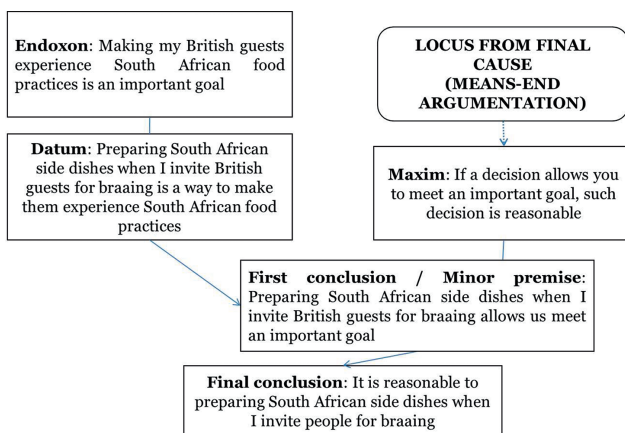
Yet, as it clearly appears if looking as Figure 1, while the maxim is an abstract inferential rule, which might be valid in different contexts, the minor premise "Cooking and consuming South African food allows us meet an important goal" needs to derive its validity from some further backing because it is not self-evident. Drawing on this consideration, the AMT model highlights that there is also a *material component* in each and every argument scheme (Rigotti and Greco Morasso 2010), which is represented on the left side of the quasi-y inferential configuration in Figure 1. The material component is constituted by another syllogistic reasoning, which is concluded with a First conclusion coinciding with the minor premise in the procedural part. The connection between these two syllogisms, thus, provides the required contextual backing to the procedural component.

The major premise in the material component is constituted by an *endoxon*, an Aristotelian term indicating an opinion that is accepted by the relevant audience, namely, the interlocutors who are jointly participating in the argumentative discussion in question. Endoxa are general propositions concerning knowledge or values, and their validity is situated in a particular conversational context. In Mary's argument in Figure 1, for example, the endoxon "Keeping your tradition is an important goal" is relative to Mary's and her husband's view of culture and not necessarily it would hold for other families. A minor premise of factual nature (*datum*) is then associated to the endoxon: "We've grown up

with South African food (it is our “traditional stuff”).” The datum is often the explicit part in argumentation, as it is in this case.

Notably, Mary’s choice is not presented as something she does unreflectively, but rather as the result of a deliberate *action*. This is why she motivates it on the basis of her goal. Besides, particularly important in this case is the endoxon, which presents the goal at the basis of Mary’s choice to continue cooking and serving South African food: “Keeping your tradition is an important goal.” Such statement remains implicit in Mary’s discourse, but it can be inferred by her explicit argument “we’ve grown up with that” at line 11, and again by her use of “traditional stuff” at line 10.

However, there is more than this in Mary’s story, as her choice of cooking South African food equally has a semiotic value in relation to people *outside her family*. Mary, in fact, answering to explicit questions by the interviewer about inter-cultural interaction around food (lines 35–36 and 39), replies that, when she invites British guests to her place, they cook on fire (lines 37–38), and she tries to make some South-African side dishes in order for them to experience her culture (lines 43–48). In this case, Mary’s deliberate choice to avoid British side dishes (“not ... having cold stuff and potatoes that you can buy at Sainsbury’s, lines 46–47) is motivated by her wish to make others take part in her experience, to give them a sort of “gift” representing her identity as a South African – a topic on which she will then return in other parts of the interview and speaking about other cultural aspects beyond food. The emphasis on the verb *to experience* (line 44) is revealing of Mary’s means-end argumentation, in which food becomes a semiotic instrument to make other people share what she has learnt and lived. Analogously to Figure 1, Figure 2 represents an AMT analysis of this argument, allowing to consider the intersection between procedural and material components in argumentation.



**Figure 2:** AMT analysis of Mary’s “gift” argument.

That offering South African food as a gift to her English guests is Mary's goal clearly appears in the representation in Figure 2. This reasoning is revealing of her attitude towards the UK, a country to which she feels grateful because moving there has allowed her to live a much better life (Greco Morasso 2013); and this brings her to wanting to offer something in exchange (Greco Morasso and Zittoun 2014).

A similar dynamics is described in the movie *Babette's Feast* (1987). Babette is a French cook who leaves Paris and gets to a small and isolated Danish village as a refugee. There, she is helped by two sisters, the unmarried daughters of a pastor, now dead, who was also the founder of his own very strict and austere congregation. She serves them as a housekeeper for several years; and, when she unexpectedly inherits some money, she uses it to prepare a feast for the sisters and the other members of the congregation on the occasion of the founding pastor's hundredth birthday. Although she never revealed it, in fact, Babette was a former chef of an important restaurant in Paris. On the occasion of Babette's feast, she makes the sisters (and their congregation) experience what eating and conviviality means in her French tradition; the sumptuous dinner, which the sisters initially intended to ignore as sinful, is eventually appreciated; it also helps improve and reconcile existing conflicts and resentment in the community. As in the case of this movie, with Mary, codes are used in order to reproduce and donate experience as a gift. In both cases, experience is not simply reproduced or replicated; in fact, it is a new experience cooking a French dinner in a forgotten village in Denmark, among a congregation which does not fully appreciate it in the first place and does not understand the value of what they are given until the very last moment. Likewise, it is a new experience braaing for some non-South-African guests. For Mary and for Babette, food assumes the semiotic value of a gift; this is a relational use of food in an intercultural perspective which goes well beyond the original codes.

## 6 Conclusions

This paper has dealt with the cultural nature of food, mainly by relying on the Tartu approach to cultural semiotics. In particular, I have been considering change and how a change in an individual's experience might bring about change in her way to use the food codes that she has inherited from her cultural community-communities. On the basis of an analysis of two representative examples, it has been shown how, in responding to a new experience in a foreign country, individuals construct all sorts of personal adaptations of codes, which may ultimately result in a change of codes themselves.

Moreover, it has been remarked that, when a change is brought about, individuals will be likely to justify it explicitly. Therefore, adopting a model for the analysis of the inferential configuration of arguments (Argumentum Model of Topics or AMT) has enabled understanding the profound premises on which individual choices are based. In the excerpts analyzed, I have focused on two examples of argumentation based on the locus from final cause, dealing with the goals of the introduced changes. Arguably, in fact, individual goals play a prominent role when a cultural custom is changed. This brings us to consider the importance of studying individual action, which is qualified by its goals, when approaching cultural and inter-cultural semiotics (Danesi and Rocci 2009). The AMT model also permits to analyze migrants' individual goals by eliciting them from implicit premises in their argumentation, notably *endoxa*. Analyzing *endoxa*, in general, has proven important in intercultural communication (Danesi and Rocci 2009). Savori (2009) has shown that the non-alignment of *endoxa* (i. e., *endoxical discrepancy*) is a potential source of cultural misunderstandings.

From the point of view of the development of a semiotics of migrants' food in general, it has been shown that it is worth integrating the macro-approach proposed by the Tartu school of semiotics with a micro-approach such as the study of ruptures and transitions in the life of individual migrants, as proposed by cultural psychologists. Such integration, which opens new paths for future research, allows a more fine-grained understanding of the interrelation between grammars and texts in a culture and of how these evolve over time and depending on an individual's life course.

## Appendix

**Table 1:** Transcription symbols.

Sign	Explanation
Eh:	Lengthening of preceding vowel is indicated by colons
A::nd	Longer lengthening of preceding vowel
(.)	Pause of one second or less
(3)	Pause of more than one second (the duration in seconds is indicated)
↑	Rising intonation (questions)
/	Slightly rising intonation (suspension)
↓	Falling intonation (exclamations)
YOU SHOULD	Capital letters indicate emphasis
( <i>looking at T</i> )	Relevant non-verbal elements and actions are indicated in italic inter brackets
[...]	Omitted from transcription
( )	Inaudible/incomprehensible

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