



SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS OF LEXICAL UNITS RELATED TO FOOD

Mukaddam Alihonova

muqaddam81@mail.ru

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18998513>

Abstract

Food-related lexical units constitute a distinct and culturally loaded segment of vocabulary with unique semantic, pragmatic, structural, and sociolinguistic properties. Despite their ubiquity, these units have not been comprehensively examined as an independent lexical field. This study investigates key characteristics of food-related lexicon, focusing on semantic motivation, metaphorization, cultural specificity, borrowings, polysemy, and discourse functions. A qualitative linguistic analysis of food-related terms across English-language corpora and secondary research reveals that food lexicon forms a highly dynamic subsystem influenced by sociocultural factors, globalization, and evolving food practices. Findings demonstrate that food terminology not only reflects material culture but also operates metaphorically, shaping expressions of emotion, evaluation, identity, and social relations. The study contributes to understanding how everyday vocabulary becomes a marker of cultural values and communicative strategies.

Keywords: lexical units, sociolinguistic properties, food-related lexicon, English-language corpora, cultural values, communicative strategies, semantic motivation, metaphorization, cultural specificity, borrowings, polysemy, discourse functions.

Introduction

Lexical units related to food form an important thematic group within any language. These units refer not only to edible items, meals, and culinary processes but also encapsulate cultural traditions, social practices, and value systems. The study of food lexicon is interdisciplinary, spanning linguistics, anthropology, sociolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, and cultural studies. Scholars note that food vocabulary is among the most culturally embedded types of lexicon because food practices differ widely across societies and historical. Food-related lexical units encompass names of foods, ingredients, cooking actions, meals, taste descriptors, kitchen tools, gastronomic classifications, and culturally specific culinary concepts. They may display a range of linguistic features: semantic transparency or opacity, borrowings motivated by culinary globalization, metaphorization, and evaluative meanings. Moreover, lexical units related to food frequently function beyond their literal meanings through idioms, slang or metaphorical extensions. Despite the richness of this lexical category, systematic linguistic analyses often treat food vocabulary as secondary to broader studies of semantic fields. The present study aims to examine the specific characteristics that distinguish food-related lexical units from other lexical groups, identifying semantic, structural, pragmatic, and cultural features. Research questions of the study are: What semantic and structural characteristics distinguish food-related lexical units?; How do cultural and social factors influence the formation and use of food lexicon?; What roles do metaphor and figurative

language play in food vocabulary?; How has globalization impacted the food lexicon in contemporary English?

Methods

This study employed a qualitative linguistic analysis involving: Academic literature on semantics, lexical typology, cognitive linguistics, and food anthropology. Corpora examples drawn from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), British National Corpus (BNC), and open-source digital dictionaries. Culinary terminology databases and etymological resources. The analysis followed an IMRaD-compliant qualitative approach, focusing on semantic categorization, word-formation patterns, cultural and sociolinguistic variation, metaphorical and idiomatic usage, borrowing and globalization effects. This framework allowed for identifying recurring patterns and distinctive characteristics relevant to the food lexical field.

Results

Many food terms are semantically motivated and easily interpretable, while others are opaque. Transparent motivation often arises from shape such as in “mushroom cap,” “pear-shaped”, color like in “blackberry,” “green tea” and preparation, for example “fried rice,” “sun-dried tomatoes”. Opaque terms frequently reflect historical or cultural shifts. Food lexicon exhibits extensive polysemy. For instance: “turkey” - a bird / a person acting foolishly, “hash” - a dish / a mixture / to chop, “toast” - heated bread / celebratory speech. This suggests food terms easily extend metaphorically into other semantic domains. Polysemy in the food lexicon refers to the phenomenon where a single food-related word has multiple related meanings. Many food terms extend beyond their literal culinary sense and develop metaphorical or cultural meanings. For example, the word “bread” can mean a staple food as well as money in informal contexts. Similarly, “sweet” may describe taste, personality, or pleasant experiences. Such semantic expansion often arises from cultural practices, social interaction, and metaphorical thinking. In linguistics, studying the polysemy of food vocabulary helps reveal how everyday experiences with eating and cooking influence language development and meaning formation across different contexts and communities. Food vocabulary is heavily grounded in sensory experience-taste, smell, texture. Adjectives like “crunchy,” “tangy,” and “buttery” blend physical and evaluative meanings, contributing to the expressiveness of food discourse. Beyond literal description, such terms often function metaphorically in everyday language. For instance, “spicy” may describe not only food but also exciting stories or bold personalities, while “smooth” can refer to both texture and social behavior. This polysemous nature enriches communication by allowing speakers to transfer sensory impressions to abstract contexts. As a result, food-related vocabulary plays an important role in shaping vivid imagery, emotional expression, and cultural associations within language. Food terminology readily forms compounds including ingredient-based ones: “chicken soup,” “garlic bread”, **chicken soup, garlic bread, tomato sauce, beef stew, apple pie, cheese cake, potato salad**, cultural-origin-based: **italian dressing, mexican rice, french toast, greek salad, chinese noodles, turkish coffee, japanese sushi**, also process-based: “stir-fry,” “slow-cook”. These compounds reflect functional and cultural categorization. In addition, compound food terms help speakers quickly convey complex culinary information in a concise form. By combining two or more lexical elements, these expressions indicate not only the ingredients but also preparation methods, cooking styles, or regional influences. For example, ingredient-

based compounds highlight the primary components of a dish, making it easier to identify its main flavor or nutritional focus. Cultural-origin-based compounds often signal traditional recipes or culinary heritage, connecting food with national or regional identity. Meanwhile, process-based compounds emphasize the technique used to prepare the dish, which can influence texture, taste, and overall presentation. Such lexical formations demonstrate how language organizes gastronomic knowledge into clear categories. They also reflect the dynamic relationship between culture, cooking practices, and linguistic creativity in the development of food-related vocabulary. Due to culinary globalization, English food vocabulary includes extensive loanwords: French: “croissant,” “souffle”, Italian: “pasta,” “risotto,” “espresso”. Borrowings play a significant role in the development of food vocabulary. As cultures interact through trade, migration, and globalization, many food-related terms are adopted from one language into another. These borrowed words often reflect the origin of particular dishes, ingredients, or culinary techniques. For example, English has borrowed terms such as *pizza* and *pasta* from Italian, *sushi* and *tempura* from Japanese, and *kebab* from Turkish. Such borrowings enrich the lexicon by introducing new concepts that may not previously exist in the receiving culture. In many cases, the original pronunciation or spelling is preserved to maintain the cultural identity of the food. Borrowed food terms also demonstrate the influence of international cuisine on everyday language. As global culinary traditions continue to spread, the number of loanwords in food terminology increases, reflecting cultural exchange and the growing interconnectedness of societies through gastronomy and language.

Discussion The analysis of food-related lexical units demonstrates that this semantic field is one of the most dynamic and culturally charged domains of vocabulary. Several major tendencies emerge when semantic, structural, and sociolinguistic characteristics are considered together. Food lexicon is uniquely tied to human sensory experience, especially taste, smell, and texture. These sensory categories shape lexical choice and contribute to the inherently evaluative nature of food terms. Words like *crunchy*, *buttery*, and *tangy* illustrate how descriptive vocabulary simultaneously conveys physical properties and subjective attitudes. Sensory semantics therefore plays a central role in structuring the food lexicon and differentiates it from other semantic fields that are less grounded in bodily perception.

The cultural specificity of food terms is another defining factor. Many languages contain items that have no straightforward equivalent in English such as *umami*, *kimchi*, *tapas*, or *chai* demonstrating that food is a domain where linguistic relativity becomes particularly visible. Food terminology encodes social identity, heritage, and cultural memory. For example, dishes such as *gumbo* or *samosa* are not merely food items but markers of ethnic, regional, or national belonging. This aligns with anthropological research showing that food is a primary symbol of collective identity. As global mobility and culinary exchange increase, food lexicon expands rapidly through borrowings and neologisms. English now incorporates numerous foreign food terms: *espresso* (Italian), *tortilla* (Spanish), *sushi* (Japanese), *baklava* (Turkish/Arabic), etc. reflecting a globalized culinary landscape. New lifestyle trends such as *veganism*, *clean eating*, or *fusion cuisine* further generate innovative lexical items, including *plant-based*, *superfood*, and *foodie*. Thus, globalization functions as both a sociocultural and linguistic force. One of the most distinctive features of food vocabulary is its strong metaphorical productivity. According to cognitive linguistics, food serves as a rich source domain for conceptual metaphors because it is central to embodied human experience. Examples include expressing emotions -

bittersweet memories, evaluating behavior-salty attitude, cheesy joke, characterizing relationships-sweetheart, arm candy. This figurative usage confirms that food lexicon structures not only literal culinary discourse but also abstract thought, enabling speakers to conceptualize emotions, personalities, and social interactions through taste, texture, and preparation. Food vocabulary also encodes social hierarchies. Terms like *organic*, *artisanal*, and *truffle* index higher economic and cultural capital, while *fast food*, *instant noodles* and *takeout* may index convenience, affordability or lower socioeconomic status. This stratification shows that lexical units related to food participate actively in linguistic expressions of class and lifestyle. Finally, food lexicon displays remarkable register versatility. In professional culinary contexts, highly technical terminology *blanch*, *caramelize*, *julienne* is used, whereas everyday conversation relies more on simple terms such as *snack*, *bite* or *leftovers*. Meanwhile, digital communication promotes entirely new usage patterns mukbang, snackable content and so on. This demonstrates that the food lexicon is adaptable across formal, informal, and digital registers. Overall, the food lexical field is distinguished by: strong sensory grounding, cultural specificity, rapid innovation due to globalization, rich metaphorical potential, sociolinguistic variation, structural openness to compounding and borrowing. These findings reinforce the view that food-related vocabulary is a linguistically and culturally significant subsystem worthy of dedicated scholarly attention.

References:

- Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. *The Language of Taste: Sensory Vocabulary Across Languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Alihonova, Muqaddam. "The establishment of terminology as a separate science." In Fergana state university conference, pp. 195-195. 2023.
- Alihonova, M. A Linguo-Pragmatic Study of Food Technology Terminology in English and Uzbek. *Central Asian Journal of Literature, Philosophy and Culture*, 5(2), 2024. 6–11. <https://doi.org/10.51699/cajlp.v5i2.1173>
- Alihonova, Mukaddam. "Food TECHNOLOGY Terms in English Idioms and Proverbs: From Concepts to Alternatives." *European Scholar Journal*, vol. 5, no. 2, 20 Feb. 2024, pp. 56-58.
- Allan, Keith. *The Oxford Handbook of Lexicography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Beal, Joan. *Language and Region*. London: Routledge, 2018.
- Counihan, Carole, and Penny Van Esterik, eds. *Food and Culture: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Crystal, David. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Duranti, Alessandro. *Anthropology and Language: A Reader*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015.
- Foley, William A. *Anthropological Linguistics: An Introduction*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019.
- Goddard, Cliff. *Semantic Analysis: A Practical Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Gottlieb, Nanette. *Language and Food: Verbal and Nonverbal Experiences*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Hall, Edward T. *Beyond Culture*. New York: Anchor Books, 1976.



- Jurafsky, Dan. *The Language of Food: A Linguist Reads the Menu*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2014.
- Kittler, Pamela Goyan, and Kathryn P. Sucher. *Food and Culture*. Boston: Cengage Learning, 2016.
- Kövecses, Zoltán. *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Macmillan, Laura. "Culinary Borrowings in Contemporary English." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 29, no. 2 (2019): 205–219.
- Newman, John. *Taste and Cognition in Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Pink, Sarah. *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. London: Sage, 2015.
- Renner, Sebastian. "Semantic Fields of Food: A Cross-Linguistic Study." *Language Sciences* 34, no. 4, 2012: 432-446.
- Schneier, Matthew. "Gastronomic Globalization and Lexical Change." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 3, 2020: 445-460.
- Trubek, Amy B. *The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey into Terroir*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008..

