Eating, othering and bonding

Yucky worms or yummy treats?

When I arrived in the UK from Poland in 2004, I did not know that prawns even existed. During our first dubious encounter, I categorized the not-so-aesthetically-pleasing crustaceans as ‘worms’ and refused to look at them, let alone consider eating them. Today, I devour these ‘worms’, and when I do, it is an occasion for my British husband to remind me that, over the years he, my ‘culinary superior’ from Western Europe, has raised my ‘impoverished’ Eastern-European palate to a totally new level. Squid, scallops, mussels, avocado, pomegranate, seaweed, lamb, haggis, sushi, Indian, Thai are some of the foods I encountered only in my adulthood thanks to my migration to Britain and my transnational coupledom that followed.
Like all couples, transnational couples like to talk. Food, as an ethnic marker and thus fertile ground for stereotyping, is one of their favorite topics, as I discovered in my research with Polish-British couples.

Food talk allows transnational couples to negotiate their divergent socio-cultural practices and customs. Ingrid Piller, who extensively researched transnational families, observes that in any relationship partners always bring in their own habits stemming from their individual preferences or family traditions. This is also true of endogamous couples but in the case of partners raised in different countries, the potential for difference talk is greater.

This is not to say that transnational partners endlessly draw divisions between themselves, experiencing what is known as a ‘cultural clash’. Rather, difference talk in transnational relationships has been shown in a considerable body of research as a positive phenomenon, entailing skillful negotiation strategies. Piller (2002), for instance, demonstrates how partners in English-German couples tend to downplay their socio-cultural differences by directly negating them, drawing out similarities or appealing to shared cosmopolitan identities. In a similar fashion, Kellie Gonçalves’s (2012) study shows how Anglophone and Swiss German partners portray themselves as harmoniously combining their divergent socio-cultural repertoires, from which they derive shared hybrid identities.

In my recent publication in the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* (Wilczek-Watson, 2018), I build on this research by discussing other forms of difference talk in transnational families, specifically in relation to food, both in everyday and celebratory contexts. The interactive practices listed above are also present in the data the article is based on – video-recorded meal-time conversations in five UK-based Polish-British families and...
audio-recorded interviews with them. However, this particular paper focuses on another recurrent discursive strategy emerging across these transnational families, namely ‘culinary othering’ – the family members’ acts of representing the food habits of their partner as different, somewhat strange, or even abnormal.

Drawing an imaginary division between ‘us’ and ‘them’, othering constitutes a form of social distancing from a given individual or a group. This practice can entail stereotyping, derogatory evaluations, and mockery of the Other, often in an attempt to achieve a positive self-presentation. Despite its undeniable negative potential, othering has also been examined as a form of bonding, for instance, in the context of gossiping interactions (Jaworski and Coupland, 2005), when the gossiping parties derive solidarity from their joint mockery aimed at third, absent parties. What if the target of othering is present and is also a member of your family?

In the food-related talk of Polish-British families in my study acts of othering seemed to function in a similar, unifying way. While the othered party was physically present and directly faced culinary mockery, both sides seemed to skillfully navigate through their difference talk, displaying a cooperative spirit. This was exhibited for example by indicating in various ways that a given comment should not be taken as stigmatising: by exaggerating stereotypical evaluations to the point of caricature, or by mitigating them, through joint laughter, reciprocated othering or even through provocation of further othering by the targeted side.

To illustrate, when comparing hospitality practices in Poland and Britain, a British partner stereotyped Polish hosts as over-hospitable and mocked their pretentious hosting with an imaginary quote:

‘Here’s the entire quantity of our cupboards on our table, that’s how great a host we are!’

(Extract 1, p.553).

Using this hypothetical utterance of the Other (Polish hosts) with a hyperbolic expression (entire), and additional stress (entire; great), the partner signaled to his Polish wife (and the Polish interviewer, myself) that his statement was exaggerated, and while it could be received as discriminatory, we (the target) accepted its humorous undertone. Moreover, the Polish partner reciprocated this othering, showing an uptake of the
strategy adopted by her British husband. The conversation continued and othering occurred multiple times between the partners throughout the interview, for instance, in relation to:

- the aesthetics of certain dishes (‘Oh God, that’s an ugly-looking fish.’ – about a traditional Polish Christmas Eve dish, carp, Extract 4, p.560);
- the quality of Polish wedding reception foods (‘they were good they were nice but ..., the focus was on volume, wasn’t it?’, Extract 5, p.562);

In cases such as these, neither side seems to take offence. Similar instances of mutual mockery and stereotyping in relation to food habits of the other recur across the participating Polish-British families. Arguably, othering comes more frequently from British partners (perhaps due to the fact the couples reside in the UK and thus Polish cuisine being ‘foreign’, becomes exoticised), some of whom also mock:

- Polish Easter dishes as monotonous (‘everything with gherkin’, Extract 2, p.555);
- everyday eating habits of their Polish spouses (‘all my family find it absolutely astonishing that Kuba will get all that milk, fill it right to the brim and sprinkle cereal on top’, Extract 3, p.557).

Nevertheless, the Polish partners likewise stereotype British culinary practices, as in this example about British Easter traditions: ‘the only English tradition we have is chocolate isn’t it? chocolate Easter eggs’, Extract 2, p.555).

These interactions demonstrate the families’ well-developed skills in manoeuvring through sensitive difference talk. The partners’ communicative collaboration reflects and further shapes their common ground, showing how othering resembles ritual mockery, which can in fact neutralise potential tensions in these transnational relationships and foster the couples’ bonding.
The above findings are limited to the Polish-British families I studied. However, culinary othering and its unifying potential is not exclusive to these relationships. As food acts as a salient indicator of class, status, wealth, and individuality, culinary othering is likely to be common enough. Can you share your own examples?

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References


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Hanna Irving Torsh
March 6, 2019 at 12:02 pm

Thanks for such an interesting post Marta! In my family, we have various ways in which food symbolises the diverse identities of family members. Food is rediscovered and made authentic – maybe a bit like the metaculture framework you used in your work. Often, after many migrations and language loss, food is all that remains to index difference from the Anglophone mainstream. My mum cooks Palatschinken and Apfelmus, my parter makes babganush and hommous, and we all make jokes about how the Anglo-Aussies in the family just want to eat piles of sausages and steak...

Alexandra Grey
February 8, 2019 at 11:09 am

There's very funny, classic comedy sketch about treating English food as foreign titled 'Going for an

Marta Wilczek-Watson  
February 12, 2019 at 12:41 am  

Hilarious! Thank you for sharing this, Alexandra 😄

Lisa Fairbrother  
February 6, 2019 at 11:03 pm  

I will often tease my husband about how love is shown in Mexican families via offering food: 'Would you like a quesadilla? And a doughnut? And some mango?' On the other hand, he'll tease me about British people eating dinner so early: 'Isn't it still lunchtime?'

Alexandra Grey  
February 8, 2019 at 11:04 am  

Fun and fascinating! I married into a foodie Hong Kongese/Cantonese family so we talk all the time about food. There's a running mild joke about my non-HK father-in-law getting a fishbone stuck in his throat while travelling on a multi-day train in the PRC and the
ensuing, ever-escalating efforts to help him. Running jokes (the fish-bone one, anyway) seem to include the target as a complicit joke-maker. Recently we all had a hands-on dessert peeling and eating a jackfruit, and we all joked about embodying foreign stereotypes, but in all these joking conversations I notice that I don't have the social position to initiate the joke. During my stints in China, I've found people love talking about how foreign their food must seem to me, to the extent that it can deflate the ambiance if I have already tried the food, but paradoxically people are also very happy if I already know their cuisine. This is because they construct it as absolutely central to cultural identity, so much so that it is difficult to explain that food is not so central in Australian cultural identity and that migrant countries have mixed food cultural practices, even within one home. Many of my Chinese students' favourite TV shows was a food tour of China through which viewers (via the host) could enjoy learning about regional food culture. (As Gegentuul's
comment notes, regional-to-region foreignness is socially salient, often lovingly joked about.) By far the most popular university English lesson I taught was about varied foreign foods and the cultures and agricultural conditions they come out of, but the jokes the students made were about themselves eating foreign foods (especially during our in-class cheese-tasting activity). The point is that not only (self-)stereotyping but sharing food, food knowledge including food lexicon are common strategies for approaching and then bridging social distance, and also for maintaining culture in diaspora conditions (with humour as the metaphoric MSG!), making your research focus a great choice!

PS – Personally, I think the commodification of this language-food-culture-affinity nexus is interesting but I hypothesise that foreign food humour is much more ambivalent once you take it from the dining table to the market. If I had endless time, I would do a study about language &
food marketisation with data from my family-in-law's work making 'Westerners' know, buy, and cook Chinese foods, as they run a food import business and have run various supermarket & foodie campaigns and events.

Marta Wilczek-Watson
February 12, 2019 at 12:36 am

Thank you for your comment Alexandra and sharing your examples – sounds like food is a major topic in your family!

You mention self-othering, which is another prominent strategy across the Polish-British families I studied, and I'm hoping to write about it soon. While
performed by both sides in these relationships, arguably it comes more frequently from the Polish partners, perhaps as a consequence of them being recurrently ‘othered’?

As part of my data included video-recordings of mealtime conversations during various celebratory events, it allowed me to also examine the families’ talk around food preparation and food sharing, which you mention. In my doctoral thesis I talked a lot about various processes of ‘metaculture’ proposed by
Urban (2001) – how these celebratory occasions in these transnational families were metacultural in that they constituted ‘culture about culture’, a metacommentary on what the families perceived as their respective culinary- celebratory codes and also how they propelled the motion of culture through the process of reproduction (the reproduced food practices, artefacts, of course always with some micromodification and through the speakers’ reflexivity on them as well as disseminatic (passing on
those food practices, in this case in the immediate family but also transnationally to other family members visiting from abroad).

What I found particularly interesting is how the partners perceived the concept of ‘authenticity’ how they referred to it (directly or indirectly), and how this all related to the above metacultural processes, leading to the question: where does ‘authenticity’ begin and where does it end? I guess the notion of authenticity would be very pertinent
to the study of food marketisation, in the context that you propose – what a great idea by the way! (I'm in, if you need me)

Gegentuul
February 6, 2019 at 11:51 am

Pickled cabbage (I think it is Sauerkraut too), stir-fried dishes and spring onion dipped in soy bean paste are often 'mocked' by my friends, who are from “authentic”, mostly lamb-eating Mongolian area, as sign of my family’s “good mastery” of north eastern Chinese dish. When it is served they sometimes call out the names of each dish in North eastern Chinese accent and make everyone laugh. Of course they all love them. However in other contexts such culinary othering works in different way and result in deliberate distancing from certain culture and identity.

Marta
February 6, 2019 at 10:11 pm

Thank you for your example of culinary othering on the regional level, Gegentuul, very interesting! Indeed, the context is highly important here and I talk about it in more depth in the article. As you note, in certain
situations more stigmatising undertones could be lurking behind such seemingly innocent food mockery.

Your comment reminded me of the talk by Seungku Park (Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania), which I had the pleasure to listen to during the Culinary Linguistics conference at Hofstra University, NY in 2015.

Seungku discussed two controversial coinages in Korea used since the mid 2000s by young Korean males to refer to young Korean females: ‘doenjang-nyeoe’ and ‘kimchi-nyeoe’, formed by adding a Korean suffix ‘nyeoe’ (girl/woman) to two food names – doenjang (soy bean paste) and kimchi. The former was used first to mean ‘young Korean (single) women who show over-consuming propensity for conspicuous life style’, which meaning then changed in the late 2000s to focus on their consumption of Western lifestyle specifically. The latter, ‘kimchi-nyeoe’ appeared in the early 2010s to replace ‘doenjang-nyeoe’, and then in the mid 2010s another meaning change occurred –
‘kimchi-nyeo’ started to be used to mean a ‘gold digger’. Seungku explained how these linguistic changes reflected the complex sociopolitical conflicts between genders and social classes in Korea, which again links to what you said about the potential of culinary othering to reveal (and likely foster) more serious tensions in certain contexts.

Ingrid Piller
February 6, 2019 at 3:07 am

Such fascinating research! Sauerkraut was certainly a big topic for my German-English couples ...

Marta Wilczek-Watson
February 12, 2019 at 1:00 am

Thank you Ingrid! Yes, that recurs in my data too, the Polish equivalent is ‘kapusta kiszona’, which is used to make one of ‘Polish’ traditional dishes – bigos (hunter’s stew). I will always remember how I made my first ever bigos in the UK in 2004 to impress my British husband (than boyfriend) just as we started dating each other. At that time Polish ingredients were not easily accessible in the UK so I had to use
normal cabbage. I think he will never forget it either...
I asked my dentist for a composite bonding but he refused and said that he wouldn't touch anything. I'm very annoyed and sometimes even embarrassed to smile. What do you think that I should do? Go to a different dentist or leave it like this?