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Eating their Words: Food and the French Language

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Language is a sponge: from the environment around it, it soaks up all the interests and concerns, values and viewpoints, beliefs and philosophies, not to mention neuroses, quirks and foibles, tics and twists, kinks and oddities that it can find, and gives them a home. It could be tempting to go so far as to say: show me your language, and I'll tell you what you are. It hardly needs stating that France and gastronomy have had a symbiotic relationship for centuries now. So strong is this relationship that it is scarcely surprising to see just how far it has spilled over into other languages arguably to the point of colonising them: instead of inventing English terms, we accept *haute cuisine*, *nouvelle cuisine*, *cordon bleu*, *sommelier*, *mître d'hotel*. Our supermarket shelves are full of *crème fraiche* In *Metroland*, the early novel by francophile Man Booker prize winner, Julian Barnes, the main character muses that French subtitles should accompany the real life experiences (especially those involving sex!) that he first encountered in French movies. In similar vein, one might imagine food and all related activities to be supplemented by a ribbon of French sub-titles.

This paper will focus on food-based idiomatic expressions in the French language. In Renaissance Italy, artist Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1526/7-1593) fashioned facial features out of food, an apple becoming a cheek, a pear a chin and corn on the cob an ear, and so forth; similarly, thanks to the packed pantry of food metaphors in French, one could argue that it is possible to express everything - from the quotidian, the nuts and bolts of daily life, to one's thoughts, emotions and desires - through French images based on bread, wine, vegetables and fruit.

Most of the expressions included here come mainly but by no means always from popular speech, from an informal linguistic register. And since I started working on this paper some time ago, I seem to be pursued at every turn by food-based French expressions: the French television channel, TF1, is said to have 'fait son miel' (made its honey) thanks to the success

of the series, *Confessions Intimes* (Bollenot, 18 March 2014); commenting on a recent Chelsea-PSG match, a *Libération* reporter states: ‘le portier Salvatore Sirigu était aux fraises’ (Salvatore Sirigu was at the strawberries i.e. off target). Nor did I know before reading this commentary that PSG are known as ‘les citrons’ (the lemons).

Little wonder, therefore, that French presidents should use food in trying to create a *persona* for themselves. Jacques Chirac, President of France from 1995 to 2007, cultivated a much loved ‘man of the people’ image especially through his well known preferences for peasant food (despite living in a chateau and being married to an aristocrat). Nicolas Sarkozy, President from 2007 to 2012, used to dismay *haute cuisine* circles in Paris by grabbing a sandwich and a diet Coke for lunch before dashing out for a jog in the gardens of the Elysée palace. His image as a (youngish) man in a hurry, eager to do things differently even at the risk of upsetting the status quo, was thereby enhanced. As for François Mitterrand, President from 1981 to 1995, his last meal consumed just before he died in 1996, has become the stuff of legend. For it, he reportedly ordered a rare – and illegal – dish of three ortolans, tiny birds about the size of a thumb, caught mainly in the Landes in southwest France (Paterniti, 1998). And what could one say of the cruel nickname that has dogged the current President, François Hollande, ‘*Flamby*’, taken from a commercially produced desert known for its wobbliness, its indecisiveness?

If French presidents have used food as their distinctive calling card, it is hardly surprising that the French should refer to other nationalities also *via* food: the British become ‘les Rosbifs’ (the roastbeefs) and, in former less politically correct times, the Italians were ‘les macaronis’. Food, racism and politics again clash in *The Simpsons* 1995 dismissal of the French as ‘cheese-eating surrender monkeys’, and what could one say of the transmogrification of French fries into ‘freedom fries’ ...?

But this paper will confine itself to the straight and narrow of language, the French language. So let’s start with the basics: if you can express only the very basics in a language, you would be said in French to ‘baragouiner’. This resonant word, derived from Breton, is attested as early as the fourteenth century. When one discovers that it is derived from ‘bara’ bread, ‘gwen’ wine, one realises that to be able to express only the most basic information in French stretches quite simply no further than being able to request bread and wine.

Bread has long been the most basic of all French foods, the equivalent of the potato is in Ireland. Proof of this, if such were needed, was provided during the recent European

elections. In an attempt to combat voter apathy, a baker in Dainville, Northern France, Patrick Lafonte, took it upon himself to offer a reward to anyone who could prove that s/he had voted. The reward was a freshly baked baguette. The lucky recipients could be said to 'avoir de la baguette' (to have the baguette): to be lucky. Eating too much baguette, of course, can produce a spare tyre or 'brioche' (cake). Someone who has work to complete has 'du pain sur la planche' (bread on the board), 'il gagne son pain' (he earns his bread), 'il met la main à la pâte' (he sticks his hand into the dough) i.e. he gets stuck in. Popular items sell 'comme des petits pains' (like small breads), but something that sells for half nothing 'se vend pour une bouchée / un morceau de pain' (for a mouthful / piece of bread). Bread expresses time in the evocative expression: 'long comme un jour sans pain' (as long as a day without bread). It can similarly evoke other grim experiences: 'perdre le goût du pain' (to lose the taste of bread) means simply to die. Cakes do more than tickle the palate: cake images can convey frustrating realities like the complex (not to say complicated) nature of public administration in France often described as a 'millefeuille administratif'.

Unsurprisingly, wine images are everywhere. 'Mettre de l'eau dans son vin' (to put water in one's wine) means to compromise. Discussions that become soured 'tournent au vinaigre' (turn to vinegar). Wine and death combine in the expression 'ramasser les cadavres' (to collect the dead bodies): to collect the empty wine bottles.

Milk:

France, through its language, emerges as a land if not of wine and roses, then at least as a land of wine and milk. Milk expressions are legion. In English, we refer to 'la crème de la crème' where the French might use the term 'le gratin' (or 'les grosses légumes', the large vegetables, of which more later). A fiery individual would be said to be 'soupe au lait' (soup made with milk). If someone is highly praised, s/he might 'boit ça comme du petit lait' (lap it up like new milk). In English, we make a song and dance about something: our French equivalents would 'en faire tout un flan/ un fromage' (make a whole flan/cheese of it). Even major decisions can be expressed via food: to take one's custom elsewhere is 'changer de crèmerie' (to go to a different creamery).

Cheese:

Unsurprisingly, cheese features prominently here too. Food is often used to mock strong physical features: 'regardez ce quart de Brie' (look at that section of Brie) refers to some

unfortunate with a prominent nose. Cheese and place: when I lived in Normandy, the locals called roundabouts 'des camemberts'. Cheese and time: one of my favourite expressions here is 'entre la poire et le fromage' (between the pear and the cheese), a reference to the end of a meal when conversation takes a more personal and confidential tone. This is also a useful reminder of the different order in which courses were once served, with dessert preceding the cheese platter. Even yoghurt has its expression: 'avoir du yaourt dans la tête' (to have yoghurt in one's head) is to be an idiot/eejit.

Butter:

Butter expressions are countless. In Cork, people might do 'a foxer' (or in Dublin: 'a nixer'): our French equivalents would 'mettre du beurre dans les épinards' (put butter in the spinach). A lucky individual might get rich or 'faire son beurre' (make his butter). Lucky indeed is the person who manages to secure 'l'assiette au beurre' (the butter dish) i.e. a plum (government) job. 'Ca fait mon beurre' (that makes my butter), he might sigh, meaning 'that suits me down to the ground'. 'On ne peut pas avoir le beurre et l'argent du beurre' (you can't have the butter and the butter money) cautions against making unreasonable demands by wanting everything and its opposite; otherwise, one might find oneself 'dans la béchamel' (to be in a fix/jam).

Sugar:

Even sugar brings with it figurative expressions: to backbite is to 'casser du sucre sur le dos de quelqu'un' (to break sugar on someone's back).

Noodles / rice :

One might have thought the humble noodle incapable of inspiring any imaginative expression. Not so: 'quelle nouille!' (what a noodle!) is an idiot/eejit. Rice emits similarly negative connotations: 'travailler pour une poignée de riz' (to work for a handful of rice) is to work for peanuts.

Fish:

In Ireland, with our high standing on international barometers of happiness, we tend - despite everything - to be 'ar muin na muice' (on the pig's back); the French, on the other hand, are 'heureux comme un poisson dans l'eau' (as happy as a fish in water). This might be because they are in love and 'se regardent avec des yeux de merlan frit' (look at each other with the

eyes of a fried whiting). The less generous among them, however, might have ‘des oursins dans les poches’ (sea urchins in their pockets).

Cabbage :

Poor people’s food, cabbage, ranges across a wide spectrum of experiences, for instance in expressions of affection such as ‘mon chou/ mon petit chou/ mon chou chou’, ‘ce qu’il est chou’ (my cabbage, how lovely he is). On the other hand, a stupid person is ‘bête comme chou’ (as stupid as a cabbage). The importance of managing delicate situations well is underlined in the expression ‘il faut ménager la chèvre et le chou’ (one must manage the goat and the cabbage, to prevent the former from eating the latter). Someone lucky enough to profit from a situation ‘fait ses choux gras’.

Onions:

Given the importance of onions in the iconography of the French (e.g. travelling French onion-sellers in England up to the 1960s: the French Johnnies; in Roscoff, a small museum, *La Maison des Johnnies et de l’Oignon*, tells the story of the Breton onion-sellers who would leave the port of Roscoff from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, to sell their wares in England; St Pol de Léon has a restaurant called *Le Comptoir des Johnnies*), it is not surprising onions featuring so prominently in idiomatic expressions. ‘S’occuper de ses oignons’ (to mind one’s onions) is to mind one’s own business, whereas someone who is very attentive could be said to ‘soigner quelqu’un aux petits oignons’ (to take care of someone down to the small onions). ‘La course à l’échalote’ (the scallion race) denotes a race for power (at a meeting I attended recently at the Ministry for Education in Paris, this image was used to dismiss university rankings).

Carrots:

Moving swiftly on to other vegetables, ‘les carottes sont cuites’ (the carottes are cooked) means we are done for (banjaxed?) as does ‘la fin des haricots’: ‘si je rate mon examen, c’est la fin des haricots’ (if I fail my exam, it’ll be the end of the beans).

Radish:

The humble radish heralds economic devastation: ‘je n’ai pas un radis’ (I don’t have a radish): I am skint. Further negative vibes emanated from the term ‘aubergine’, once given to traffic

wardens due to the colour of their uniforms. Nor do turnips get a good press here: 'un navet' (a turnip) is a bad film.

Potatoes:

In France, the potato may not occupy the central place it does in Ireland. Nonetheless, it has its role to play. 'Avoir la patate' means to be in great form. On the other hand, 'quelle patate, ce type-la!' (what a potato that guy is!) is said of an idiot; 'Oh purée!' is the equivalent of the expression, 'damn' or 'bother'. It is probably a softening of 'oh! putain!' (oh! prostitute!). The humble potato can also be the vehicle for emotions: 'en avoir gros sur la patate' (to have a heavy potato) is the French equivalent of having a heavy heart. In relatively recent slang, to be in great form is 'avoir la frite' (to have the chip/French fry).

Salade:

Salads, while healthy, can express messy realities. 'Quelle salade!' (what a salad!) is said of a mess, while 'c'est une vraie salade russe' means to be very confused. 'Elle raconte des salades' (she is telling salads) means that she is telling cock and bull stories. All of this healthy eating can be fatal: someone who is said to be eating 'des pissenlit par les racines' (dandelions from the roots) is pushing up daisies i.e. is dead. As for artichokes, 'il a un coeur d'artichaut' (he has an artichoke's heart) is said of someone who falls in love with everyone. The humble leek fares poorly in these images. 'Faire le poireau/ rester plante comme un poireau' (to act like a leek, to remain standing like a leek) implies that one is waiting around, perhaps for a date who has not turned up. If someone is said to 'tirer une carotte' (pull a carrot), they are lying. Not does asparagus fare much better. 'Quelle asperge!' is said of a tall, lanky person, while a prostitute would be said to 'aller /être aux asperges', perhaps because of her high heels. Mushrooms unexpectedly enter the world of cars in the phrase 'écraser/ appuyer sur le champignon' (to crush/ lean on the mushroom), meaning to step on the accelerator. Someone over zealous in this regard might end up in a 'panier à salade' (the salad basket), a police van.

Fruit:

French apples evoke scenes of Normandy, Impressionist paintings and springtime. In French, a child might be 'haut comme trois pommes' (as high as three apples, the Gallic equivalent of 'knee high to a grasshopper'). On the other hand, to faint is 'tomber dans les pommes' (to fall into the apples), in which the confusion between 'paumer' and 'pommes' becomes quite

comic. As for pears, ‘quelle poire, ce type-la!’ (what a pear that guy is!) is said of an innocent abroad. In business, ‘la poire est mûre’ (the pear is ripe) means that now is the time to strike, while ‘couper la poire en deux’ (to cut the pear in half) means to compromise, to meet someone half way. Matters of the heart surface in a strawberry-related expression: ‘aller aux fraises / aller cueillir des fraises’ (to go strawberry picking) means to head out into the countryside on a love quest. Of the impressive Mayor of Lille, Martine Aubry (daughter of Jacques Delors) I heard someone remark recently: ‘Martine a la pêche ces jours-ci’ (Martine has the peach these days): Martine is looking great / perky these days. One would hope that such praise would not give her ‘le melon’, a big head. The mixed fruit offering, ‘mi-figue mi-raisin’ (half fig, half grape) indicates something ambiguous, that is neither here nor there: ‘son livre a été reçu des critiques mi-figue mi-raisin’ (his book was received by critics half fig half grape). Fruit derivatives feature too: ‘donner de la confiture à un cochon’ (to give jam to pigs is our ‘pearls before swine’ image).

Eggs:

Eggs give rise to countless wide-ranging expressions. Sexism lurks often just under the radar in these expressions: of a flat-chested woman one might remark ‘elle a des oeufs sur le plat’ (she has eggs on the plate). In English, a skinflint might be said to skin a flea; his French equivalent would ‘tondre un oeuf’ (shave / mow an egg). In English, we talk about a ‘good egg’; no such *bonhomie* in French: ‘quel oeuf!’ (what an egg!) is said of an idiot.

Meat:

Meat images, which are legion, tend in the main to be negative. In Hiberno-English, we might order someone to stop ‘acting the maggot’; in French, we would shout ‘arrête de faire l’andouille’ (stop acting like a sausage). Specifically, black pudding or blood pudding features strongly here: ‘tu me fais tourner le sang en boudin’ (you are thickening my blood into black pudding): you are worrying me sick. Of some enterprise that just peters out, we could say: ‘ça finit en eau de boudin’ (that ends in black pudding water). We all remember the mad cow disaster in the UK some years ago: to go through hard times in French is ‘manger de la vache enragée’ (to eat rabid cow). In the land of reputed frog-eaters, ‘manger la grenouille’ (to eat the frog) is to fritter away a fortune. A whole other presentation would be needed to even scratch the surface of all the French proverbs based on food. Just one: to make do with what one has is ‘faute de grives, on mange des merles’ (for want of thrushes, we eat blackbirds).

Vegetables, meat and /or fish can of course combine to produce soup. One of my all-time favourite expressions here is ‘arriver comme un cheveu sur la soupe’ (to arrive like a hair on soup) i.e. unexpectedly. ‘Trempe comme une soupe’ (as soaked as soup) is an experience well known in Ireland, while ‘cracher dans la soupe’ (to spit in soup) is to be ungrateful. In political circles and elsewhere, ‘aller à la soupe’ (to go to the soup) is to fall in with general consensus despite one’s private doubts.

Kitchen utensils:

Kitchen utensils and accoutrements feature prominently alongside food expressions *per se*. Saucepans fare particularly badly. ‘Raisonné comme une casserole’ (to reason like a saucepan) is to use flawed argument, whereas ‘chanter comme une casserole’ (to sing like a saucepan) is to sing badly. ‘Piquer dans l’assiette de quelqu’un’ (to steal from someone’s plate) is to be a sponger. ‘Il ne faut pas mélanger les torchons et les serviettes’ (never mix up the dusters and the napkins) is reportedly what Pierre Bergé snapped when the portrait of his partner, Yves Saint Laurent, was included with those of designers rather than of artists at the Andy Warhol exhibition in Grand Palais in 2009. ‘On n’est pas sorti de l’auberge’ (we are not yet out of the inn) is the equivalent of the English ‘we are not yet out of the woods’. Among the very many French expressions relating to prison, ‘mettre quelqu’un au frigidaire / au frigo’ (to put someone in the fridge) is to put someone in prison. And the evocative expression, ‘un déjeuner de soleil’ (a sun lunch/ a lunch in the sunshine) refers to something lovely but short lived.

Background / sources :

Several other papers would not suffice to cover the myriad sources of these expressions. Many are biblical : ‘la période des vaches maigres ’ refers to an Old Testament famine. One of my favourites is the French for a godsend : ‘arriver comme marée en carême’ (to turn up like a high tide in Lent), evoking the lives of fishing communities and the godsend for them of a rich tide bearing fish in Lent. Where there is religion, there is anticlericalism: among the evocative names of cakes in France, alongside ‘religieuse’ (a nun), there is ‘pet de nonne’ (a nun’s fart). ‘Je pourrais manger un curé frotté d’ail’ (I could devour a priest rubbed with garlic) translates as ‘I could eat a horse’. Unsurprisingly, too, literary culture is never far off: to secure a sinecure is ‘se retirer dans un fromage / avoir un bon fromage’ (to take up residence in a cheese / to have a good cheese): a reference to a fable popularised by seventeenth-century writer, La Fontaine. As for Proust, ‘être la madeleine de quelqu’un’ is to

be the source of someone's memories: 'elle n'est pas ma madeleine'. Much of the slang in question is professional slang, for instance journalistic slang: a rag of a newspaper is 'une feuille de chou' (a cabbage leaf), to write reams is 'écrire des tartines, (to write slices of bread), and 'un maronnier' (a chestnut tree) is a puff piece of journalism.

Funny, creative, poetic, lyrical, these food expressions weave in and out of the French language from earliest times down to our own. In fifteenth century Paris, the greatest poet of medieval France, François Villon, expressed his hunger and his envy through the simple but devastating phrase: 'pain ne vois qu'aux fenêtres' (the only time I see bread is in through [other people's] windows). Four centuries later, the Queen of France, Marie-Antoinette, stands accused of triggering a revolution when she allegedly told her starving subjects to eat cake ('qu'ils mangent de la brioche). In our own times, some of the most fascinating changes transforming the French language (vocabulary especially) come from beyond the Paris *périphérique*, from the disadvantaged *banlieues* where French, Arabic and American slang are creating a language that is both wild and wonderful, and in which food expressions are as strong as ever. Here, fundamental realities like money are translated – surprisingly - into herbal images: 'faut avoir du persil / de l'oseille ou alors t'es rien' (you must have parsley / sorrel or you're nobody). As we say in English: 'plus ça change ...!'

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