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## Garlic and love: gastronomic communication in an intercultural family

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### Abstract

The paper discusses gastronomic discourse in a family including representatives of different cultures from semiotics and communication perspectives. The non-verbal aspect deals with foodstuffs, dishes, use of space and time, distribution of responsibilities between family members, artefacts, and scripts (sequences of actions). Verbal signs are represented by nominations of foodstuffs, dishes and artefacts, gastronomic metacommunication, and etiquette phrases accompanying a meal. The analysis of the way gastronomic systems are combined can be further extended to the study of other aspects of life in an intercultural family, such as living space, religious beliefs, moral values, etc.

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### 1. Introduction

A wise person once remarked that compatibility in intercultural marriage has as much to do with garlic as with values (Romano, 2001, p. 45). Food is one of the key factors ruling the fate of families, which include representatives of different cultures. Experienced spouses agree with scholars who argue that preferences in food are no less important than the choice of family language – neither of them can be ignored.

The present study is based on the research of different aspects of communication in an intercultural family carried out by the author of this paper and E. V. Bondarenko (Yakusheva) (Bondarenko, 2010; Leontovich and Yakusheva, 2013). It employs the mixed method research design including observation, use of questionnaires and interviews, narrative, biographic, and semiotic analyses. The respondents were 193 intercultural family members from 19

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countries (Leontovich, 2014). Most of the opinions quoted in the paper are postings on Internet forums and sites devoted to intercultural marriages, answers to our questionnaires, or real-life situations observed in the course of research.

## 2. Discussion

*Factors* which define the choice of food in different ethnic groups include:

1) cultural traditions; 2) assumptions about approved or disapproved food preferences: e. g. in most cultures eating humans is a taboo, but in some groups cannibalism is a norm; Europeans think that eating dogs is horrendous, whereas Koreans believe it is OK; Russians enjoy eating beef, but in India a cow is a sacred animal; insects, worms, snakes and turtles are seen as food in some cultures and are rejected in others; 3) religious traditions, such as kosher food in Jewish communities; fasting before Christmas and Easter prescribed by Russian Orthodox church; a ban on pork and alcohol for Muslims, etc.; 4) ideology, i. e. vegetarianism; 5) attitude towards health: the use of ecologically clean food in developed countries; ideas about useful and harmful food in different communities, etc.

Semiotics of food intersects with other semiotic systems defined by religion, etiquette, economy, system of artefacts, etc. and includes both verbal and non-verbal signs.

The *non-verbal sphere* of gastronomic family communication is represented by visual, olfactory, gustatory, behavioural, and other types of signs.

*Foodstuffs* acting as signs can be culturally marked and non-marked. *Culturally non-marked* products, such as bread, milk, meat, fish, butter, etc., are used in many cultures and are usually not associated with a particular country or ethnic group. *Culturally marked* foodstuffs become a symbol of their community where they form the basis of the national cuisine. The same sign can be neutral (rice in Russia) or culturally marked (rice in China or Japan). Tastes and smells familiar since childhood are very powerful on the physiological level and become part of a person's cultural identity (e. g. the taste and smell of rye bread for Russians).

The habits, likes and dislikes of spouses – natives of different cultures – can be very different. Those enjoyed by one can be unpleasant and even repugnant for the other. In this connection D. Romano described two couples: in one a Scottish wife could not get used to the smell of raw onion coming from her Iranian husband; in the other a Swedish husband always complained that the smell of Malaysian food cooked by his wife nauseated him (Romano, 2004, p. 47). When Filipino women in Europe cook fish in hot oil, it “produces — by German tastes — a terrible smell which will not disappear from the apartment for days even if you let in fresh air” (Beer, 1996, p. 202. Qtd. from: Roth, 2005, p. 229). A US friend told us how relatives had sent his Russian wife what he called dead dry fish, and he found the strong smell reaching the nostrils of his neighbours embarrassing.

The treatment of foodstuffs and the way they are cooked (hygiene, use of fresh or processed products, the technique of their treatment, eating them cold or hot, etc.) in different cultures may also differ, like in the following example of a Russian – US family: *Yes, as a Russian, I use a lot of wholesome ingredients. I DON'T TRIM MY FAT OFF if you know what I mean. I use whole milk and cherish the whipped butter! This doesn't go too well in the USA where people generally prefer to cook with leaner, healthier ingredients.*

A *dish* is a more complex sign than separate products. Examples include culture-specific dishes, such as Russian *shchi* (cabbage soup), *rasstegayi* (small open pies with a filling), *blintchiki* (crêpes), *pelmeni* (sort of dumplings); Spanish *paella*; Japanese *sushi*; Italian *spaghetti*, *pizza*, *risotto*, etc.

Not every dish seems tasty and acceptable for a representative of another ethnic group. Here is an opinion of an American who visited Russia: *If you have to choose between eating holodets and being run down by a trolley, seriously consider the trolley variant.*

In many cultures (e. g. in India, Tunisia, Ghana, the Philippines) the number of dishes cooked and served can be a sign of the family's status and affluence, especially during receptions or holidays.

*Meal organization.* Meals occupy an important place in family communication. Their high significance results not only from their function of food supply, but also from their social and communicative functions when “table manners and rituals, values and norms are passed on, above all to the children at the table” (Jeggler, 1988. Qtd. from: Roth, 2005, p. 227).

The number of meals, their content and place in the worldview of representatives of different cultures can be fundamentally different. L. Visson writes that the word *lunch* (*obed*) for an American may be associated with a ham

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