

**Women as Food in Hispanic Cultural Metaphors**  
by Carolina Gutiérrez-Rivas

## 1. Introduction

Metaphors are important instruments of cognition. They reproduce and show several aspects of societies and a lot about the way cultures work. They also have a central role in our perceptual structure. Mey (2001:203) specifies that “metaphors are always charged with high pragmatic explosives.” In other words, metaphors are loaded with meanings that are rooted very deeply within a culture and that may, potentially, hurt people’s feelings or distort their character. In the Hispanic culture, the ways in which women and women’s body parts are categorized as food are incredibly vast. *Bacalao*, *bollo* and *papaya* (codfish, scone and papaya) are only some of the terms used to refer to the vagina. Others like 1) *ceviche* (ceviche) 2) *aceituna negra* (black olive) and 3) *lechuga* (lettuce) refer to foods and/or women that 1) all drunks want (to eat), 2) are black and petite but still desirable (“edible”), 3) are present at every party, but nobody wants (to eat) them.

Given that these metaphors almost always allude to women as something that can be ingested (but seldom as the subject who ingests), I decided to investigate what the folk beliefs are regarding the relationship between the two. The data from this study comes from various online non-academic glossaries and forums containing vocabulary related to food metaphors for women in the Spanish language. The reason for this choice is to explore what is there in the common individual’s imaginary, since I consider this a valid place to study language mechanisms and patterns.

## 2. Metaphors: A Window to Popular Thinking

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggested that metaphors not only make our thoughts more vivid and interesting but they actually structure our perceptions and understanding. According to López-Rodríguez (2009:78) through metaphors people express a picture of reality or a world view. Metaphors derive in some cases from analogies, since it is relatively easy and spontaneous for humans to create such by watching the ordinary things common to them and the world that surrounds them. Metaphors can become so ingrained in a culture that nobody questions the meaning behind them. In fact, they are an excellent mechanism to introduce, spread out and reaffirm folk beliefs because they are charged with ideological components.

Some theorists have also developed the concept of “generative metaphors,” which are “those that allow a whole sluice of metaphors that everybody understands because the generative one underlies the general thinking patterns; e.g., war, or sports, or business, etc.” (Hardman, 2006: personal communication). Hardman explains that, in the English language, speakers have the tendency to express good things with violent metaphors, to the point that some people cannot distinguish what is good from what is bad. Such (un)conscious practices contribute to perpetuate the preexisting negative thinking patterns and hide the pluridimensionality of human existence. Therefore, many of the good ideas are lost and it becomes a hard task to change our surrounding reality. I argue that the same phenomenon also happens with speakers of the Spanish language when they refer to women using generative metaphors of food.

Some studies, like López-Rodríguez's, show that certain metaphors in Spanish and English often understand gender differences in terms of animal imagery to degrade particular social groups that are regarded as inferior or marginal. Other researchers examine metaphors in Spanish that link women to objects, such as statues, robots, dolls, merchandise and garbage (Cf. Pedraza, 1998). Pedraza states that it is about the woman as object that the projection of the male imaginary reaches its last consequences, with the creation of artificial women. According to the author, these imply one of the biggest ideals in the masculine mind. For example, dolls represent a metaphor for consumption, a humiliation of the feminine. In Spanish, the noun "muñeca" (doll) is used to designate toys which resemble girls and also real younger women with nice bodies. The doll is, then, a reproduction of the masculine ideal of femininity. Therefore, it can be concluded that through these metaphors, the stereotypical view of the female person and the masculine idea of (what) femininity (should be) are reinforced.

Frigolé Reixach's study from 1987 focuses on some languages of the Iberian Peninsula and the Northern Mediterranean Sea (i.e. Spanish, Basque, Portuguese, French) and it focuses on the notions that prevail in popular culture about metaphors for women and all of the domestic procedures and processes vital to human existence. Those include the house, and parts of the house (i.e. chimney, keys, cooking instruments). Even though the study is of an incalculable value and Reixach emphasizes that metaphors related to objects and women are historically conditioned, the study is only a mere reconstruction of the conceptual system used to describe women's social and biological

“nature”. Frigolé Reixach’s research focuses on the origin of such associations but it does not criticize in depth their meaning and use.

In the next few pages, it is my intention to show that generative metaphors, as innocuous as they may seem, hide great power and can harm people psychologically and emotionally. As I will exemplify later, in Spanish, some people (women included) categorize women and/or women’s body parts as food that 1) can be eaten, or, 2) are edible only in certain occasions; these metaphoric projections contribute to support the idea that women are mere products to be consumed, enjoyed and discarded.

### **3. Women as Food: Are They Edible?**

The metaphor-making process is, of course, cognitive, and the way humans help create metaphors and interact with them varies from culture to culture. Also, it is crucial to point out that cognitive schemata are not constructed on the individual capacities of perception and experiences only, but they emerge from the social and the cultural experience we all share.

As curious as it may seem, it has already been stated that in many places around the world, the human mind seems to conceive connections between eating and the sex act, to the point that many languages designate the latter with the word(s) used for the former (Lévi-Strauss, 1964: 157)<sup>1</sup>. The choice of food is a process in which nutrition produced by nature is transformed into food, a product of culture. People do not accept all possible substances as edible but make choices. Culture defines how possible nutrition is coded into acceptable food (Cf. Lévi-Strauss, 1966).

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<sup>1</sup> In some regions of Meridian Spanish, men may say “me la comí” (I ate her) to imply they have had sex

If, within a culture, people make metaphoric projections that relate women to food, they are showing that for them, women are acceptable or adequate depending on how well they look or taste, or depending on how cheap and accessible they can be. If we make a parallelism between language and Lévi-Strauss's theories about the meaning of food within a culture, we will find that these sorts of metaphors imply a superficial way of categorizing women and a frivolous mechanism to reduce them to just a "product" nature offers men for their sustenance. Metaphors of this kind also mean women are to be transformed so that they become desirable enough to be men's food of choice. This poses some contradictions about how females are seen in relation to nature. One of the most productive images about women in society is the conceptualization of feminine as a form of life that is more linked to nature. Often, women are represented for their capacity to bring life into existence. A woman's body is a matrix, the origin of everything, the substance, the mother and the matter (Cf. Ribas and Todolí, 2008). The positive side of this projection is that since women are substance and matter they are a potential element for nourishment. The negative side is that the subject/eaters decide what or which of those elements/objects are "acceptable" or "good enough" to eat.

The first two sets of metaphors I display in tables 1 and 2 illustrate how women's sex organ and breasts are portrayed as food. The words I reproduce below were collected from a great variety of Spanish dialects (including that from the Peninsula and Latin American). The examples come from *Avizora*, an on-line glossary of vulgar terms, insults and swear-words.

*Table 1. Women's Sex Organs (Vagina and outermost sex organs)*

Type of Food	Country Abbreviation(s) <sup>2</sup>	English Equivalent
<i>Bacalao</i>	M	Codfish
<i>Bollito</i>	V	Roll
<i>Bollo</i>	C, V	Scone
<i>Cajeta</i>	A, CH, U	Milk pudding (also known as "Dulce de leche")
<i>Concha</i>	A, U	Scallop
<i>Cuca</i>	CO, V	Cookie made out of wheat flour and brown sugar
<i>Mamey</i>	M	Mamey (a sort of nut)
<i>Panocha</i>	M	Stuffed bread (sometimes with honey and/or cheese)
<i>Papaya</i>	CO, U	Papaya
<i>Pepa</i>	A, U	Seed or fruit (i.e. cashew)

*Table 2. Women's Breasts*

Type of Food	Country Abbreviation(s) <sup>3</sup>	English Equivalent
<i>Limonas</i>	U	Lemons
<i>Melones</i>	U	Watermelons
<i>Pechugas</i>	ES, U	Chicken Breast

<sup>2</sup> I reproduced the table just as it appears on Avizora. The countries are mentioned only by their first(s) initial(s): A: Argentina; CO: Colombia; CH: Chile; ES: Spain; M: México; U: Uruguay; V: Venezuela.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

At this point, it is especially important to highlight the close relationship that exists between metaphors and euphemisms, given that the words in the tables above are used as such. De Gregorio de Mac (1973: 14) explains that euphemisms represent a source of valuable elements, since they are expressions of some significant features of the collective subconscious and show us some characteristics of the spoken language. Consequently, to observe the linguistic functioning and manifestations allow us to understand the idiosyncrasy of human groups.

According to de Mac, some metaphors are semantic euphemisms that enter the language through a linguistic procedure caused by resemblance. She states that euphemisms are intimately related to some kind of taboo. The word "taboo" is of Polynesian-origin and designates "that which cannot be touched." Taboo terms can be used to name objects that one does not dare to touch or see and also to replace words one is not to pronounce. Young (2005:112) argues that "the concept of taboo belongs to societies or social practices that make a strong distinction between the sacred and the profane...Purity...usually requires preservation of spatial and practical borders, and a taboo generates rules against crossing borders."

The linguistic representation of sexual body parts as food could reveal several things about the thinking patterns of Spanish speakers and the Hispanic culture in general. On the one hand, it is not considered appropriate to call the female sex organ or breasts by their standard (or scientific) names (*vagina/senos*) because saying the words or talking directly about the topic can be embarrassing or scandalous. It defies the image of women and their bodies as pure and chaste. On the other hand, if euphemisms enter

the language by resemblance, such body parts are seen as edible goods. Therefore, the association between the forbidden and the pleasant is evident, and at the same time the use of food names to refer to the vagina and the breasts shows that women are a source of satisfaction and pleasure.

The second set of metaphors, which I display in Table 3, is related to the categorization of women as (un)desirable food items. Doing a survey through different websites containing informal glossaries and joke forums, I discovered an array of metaphors that designate women and women's body parts as food in derogatory ways or with negative connotations<sup>4</sup>. The following examples belong to the *Univision Forum On-Line*. In the table, I include the Spanish word, its English equivalent and the metaphor:

*Table 3. Categorization of Women as (Un)Desirable Food Items*

<b>SPANISH WORD</b>	<b>ENGLISH TRANSLATION</b>	<b>METAPHOR FOR WOMEN WHO ARE...</b>
1. <i>Aceituna negra</i>	Black Olive	...black and petite but still desirable.
2. <i>Vaso de agua</i>	Glass of Water	...easy to get.
3. <i>Ceviche</i>	Ceviche	...wanted by drunk men
4. <i>Fiambre</i>	Cold dish	...eaten at every picnic.
5. <i>Canchita</i>	Pop-corn	...eaten at the movies.
6. <i>Papas Lay's</i>	Lay's Potato Chips	...noisy when they are being eaten.
7. <i>Lechuga</i>	Lettuce	...present at every party, but nobody wants (to eat) them.

<sup>4</sup> Note that in each case the verb "to eat" is a literal translation of "comer" which, as I said earlier, is associated with the sexual act.

8. <i>Caviar</i>	Caviar	...only eaten by rich men.
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Notice that none of the metaphors categorize women as food in a positive way (i.e. quality food, nourishing food, designer's food and so forth). They are "nicknames" (as specified in the title of the forum) who are meant to be funny jokes about non-white women or women who are "easy," "ugly," "annoying," or initiate sexual relations based on an agenda. Furthermore, all of these names are directly associated to the woman's sexual activity (or the lack of it).

Example 1, *Aceituna negra*/Black olive, speaks for itself: women of a certain physiognomy (i.e. black and/or petite) may not be very desirable. Kerner (2009: 188) establishes a convincing analogy between racism and sexism, not only because linguistically, the second term is a derivation from the first, but because both of them can be understood as manifestations of power. More specifically, they imply hierarchy, discrimination and violation, and they operate in relation to the beliefs that there are fundamental differences between humans. París Pombo (2002: 289-90) claims that, unlike the United States and Europe, where there exist fundamentalist groups against non-white people, in Latin America, the expressions of racism are very diffuse. However, racial categories do influence sociocultural evaluations (i.e. the aesthetic appreciations most publicized in advertising, the mass media, interpersonal relationships, family and love relationships, alliances, and even possibilities within the job market). According to París Pombo, "while a big majority seems to reject the idea of superior or inferior races, discrimination practices and racist prejudices are common"

(293, my translation). If a woman is called a “black olive” that means that, even though she is being framed into a racially inferior group and she is not exactly well-built, she does not necessarily have to be an outcast from the group of desirable (edible) women.

In example 2, *Vaso de agua/ Glass of water*, the expression “a glass of water” is a pun<sup>5</sup> that implies women are as easy to get as a glass of water. In general, mainly because of our Spanish heritage in customs, and due to the precarious financial situation of most of Latin American countries, material possessions are closely watched and people take good care of them. Since they are not easily replaceable if damaged or broken, people often do not lend their belongings without regard. However, a glass of water is something that no one would (or should) refuse to give to anyone else who would ask for it. This only reflects the scarce value a woman has within the household and in daily life in general.

In examples 3, 4 and 5, it is viable to establish a parallelism with “women as objects”, which I have previously mentioned. The representation of women who are wanted by drunk men when they have the “munchies” or who are “eaten” (meaning, used to have any kind of sexual act with) at casual places, like the movies or picnics, proves that still in the Spanish speakers’ collective imaginary, women are viewed as objects or products (in this case edible). They are meant to serve a double purpose: 1) to satisfy cravings, and 2) to perform as cheap entertainment.

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<sup>5</sup> In Spanish there is a saying: “un vasito de agua no se le niega a nadie” (no one should/would refuse to give somebody else a glass of water). Also, the third person pronoun “se” is ambiguous: it can be impersonal or it can be reflexive, meaning that it is her, the woman, who does not refuse to deliver herself to whoever wants her.

Example 6, *Papas Lay's/Potato chip*, refers to women who are loud, and therefore annoying, when having sex. It brings to mind a very popular joke in Spanish that goes "What does a woman do after making love? She stands in the way."<sup>6</sup> According to Cepeda (2007: 259), women's lack of power is evidenced through their discourse: they must express approval, be indirect and non confrontational. Sometimes silence can be their best strategy to save face. As an extension of this behavior towards men, women must pretend innocence and lack of knowledge in sexual matters.

Somehow, the cultural patriarchal models we live by in the Hispanic World nowadays are still controlled by 19th Century morals. Hincapié (2007:295) provides account of how some manuals from the period instructed women on how to be "good." According to Hincapié's study, every good woman who followed the manual's indications about conduct and spirituality was also a pretty woman, because she was innocent, virginal, and angelic. Her spiritual purity would reflect on her physical beauty, since she was the superior work of God; she should be chaste and show sublime feelings.

Surprisingly, and even though we live in times that suggest women have acquired more privileges and have a wider range of action than two centuries ago, when the first feminists began their struggle, , they are still not, and never have been, free to express the joy and pleasures that come from sex. If a woman dares to do that, she is regarded as annoying because she knows "too much" about a topic she is not supposed to be acquainted with, and she is exceeding her function as a mere source of pleasure for men. In the Spanish language there is a specific term used to denote the situation of

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<sup>6</sup> "¿Qué hace una mujer después de hacer el amor? Estorba".

hierarchic superiority of men over women in every aspect of life (especially) including sex freedom: *machismo*. The Spanish Royal Academy of Language (Real Academia Española) defines *machismo* as “the attitude of prepotency from men towards women” (my translation). Also, Mujcinovic (2001:49) defines *machismo* as the “distinct norms of conduct for men and women, condemning a double standard that allows freedom to men while denying it to women”. This seems to suggest that, paradoxically, for Hispanic women it is smart to show themselves as ignorant with regard to some matters.

Examples 7 and 8 are situated on the opposite sides of the same spectrum: lettuce is a simple and cheap vegetable that anyone can buy and prepare; whereas caviar, processed fish eggs, is expensive and only a few can consume it. Women portrayed as lettuce are silly and insubstantial. They are easy to find but who would want them if they are so common? However, women as caviar are delicate, rare to obtain, and a pleasure to eat<sup>7</sup>. Therefore lettuce is for everybody but no man wants it, and caviar is not for everybody but it is the cherished desire of every man; only the rich ones get it.

#### 4. Final remarks

Several studies in the Spanish language have addressed the topic of metaphors in the Hispanic culture, but only a few have analyzed the relationship between this concept and women. Lopez Rodriguez’s work establishes a parallelism between farm animals and women: “They render service to man, either by helping in farm labor or by producing foods (e.g. milk, eggs, and meat). These two characteristics yield the factors

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<sup>7</sup> Actually, the last two meanings of the word “caviar” on the Webster Dictionary are: 2) something considered too delicate or lofty for mass appreciation and 3) something considered the best of its kind. This metaphor could represent, in popular terms, the “gold-digger” or the “trophy wife”.

of servitude and edibility, factors which will be central to the metaphoric identifications of women with farm animals (87)". Pedraza (1998) and Ribas and Todolí (2008) focus on the whole array of metaphors for women as objects such as: women as dolls, women as merchandise, women as garbage and so on. All of them are meant to project the notion that women are artificial and superficial, they must show perfect physical appearance and are, after all, disposable.

In this study, I have considered in detail, as far as the few available sources have allowed me, how metaphors of food for women in the Spanish language seem harmless in surface, but very noxious when deeply considered. Such structures are accepted within the culture as natural and funny, and people use them, because they are not perceived as rude or offensive when joking. Conceptualizations like these are common in every culture. As Mead (1965: vi) says, "a culture may seize upon the very obvious facts of difference in age, sex, in strength, in beauty, or the unusual variations...and make these dominant cultural themes." The problem comes when social conventions, especially those stated and manifested through language, are used to oppress the powerless and the weakest. Like Lopez Rodriguez's, Pedraza's and Ribas and Todolí's works, this paper is another proof that women are seen as products to be consumed, enjoyed and discarded. As I showed above, metaphors of "women as food" reaffirm the idea that female human beings' function is no other than satisfy male human beings' cravings, entertain them and amuse them.

Dejbord-Sawan (2006) says that it is undeniable that cultural production in the Western world has been dominated by men and for men. For centuries, women's bodies have

been a territory colonized by representation practices and theorizations made about it. I argue that colonialism has many forms of expression, some of them more subtle than others. Language is a powerful tool that helps maintain such process, and metaphors of food only perpetuate the notion that women are not as unique and valuable as men. Everybody, especially the common individual, should be warned about the (bad) use(s) of generative metaphors.

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