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to the Translation of the Culinary Code**

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EATING THE OTHER
A Semiotic Approach
to the Translation of the Culinary Code

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ABSTRACT

[English]

Eating the Other.

A Semiotic Approach to the Translation of the Culinary Code

Eating and food are often compared to language and communication: anthropologically speaking, food is undoubtedly the primary need. Nevertheless, as Roland Barthes (1961) defends, this need is highly structured, and it involves substances, practices, habits, and techniques of preparation and consumption that are part of a system of differences in signification. In this sense we can speak about a *semiotics of food*: far from simply coinciding with material needs or physiological and perceptive processes, nutrition concerns all the various activities, discourses, and images that surround and are associated with it (Pezzini 2006). Food is not only a substance for survival and nourishment, but is also part of a sign system as it is strictly involved in processes of signification and interpretation. Specifically, it can be conceived as a *language* expressing social structures and cultural systems (Lévi-Strauss 1967; Montanari 2006). As such, it is not only an instrument of cultural identity, but perhaps the first way to come into contact with different cultures (Montanari 2006). This has become particularly evident in contemporary societies, where the development of new technologies of communication and the advances in transportation have caused a process of international integration and crossing, enhancing the interchange and interdependence

of world views, products, economic activities, ideas, and other aspects of culture. Such hybridisation processes have increasingly affected food, causing the crossing and overlapping of different *foodspheres*. Migrations, travels, and communications unceasingly expose local food identities to food alterities, activating interesting processes of transformation and “translation” which continuously re-shape and re-define such identities and alterities. Ethnic food, moreover, has become a fundamental presence in western food cultures: from the several *döner kebabs* filling up the streets where we walk to the many *sushi* bars and the more and more present Eritrean, Senegalese, or Asiatic restaurants, the offer of the *food of the Other* in our societies is extremely wide and varied. Ethnic shops are increasing in number, and in many city markets the local products are increasingly complemented with spices, vegetables, and other foods required for the preparation of exotic dishes. This same phenomenon, furthermore, has progressively become popular even in the large retail: in North America and Europe, for example, recent decades have seen the growth of foreign foods on supermarket shelves, sometimes in sections specifically devoted to exotic food, and sometimes even next to the local and more common products.

The aim of the present research is precisely to meditate on such phenomena, trying to decipher and analyse the processes of *translation of the culinary code*. What happens to foods and food-related habits, practices, and meanings when they are carried from a foodsphere to another one? What are the main aspects intervening in such dynamics? And how can semiotics help understanding such processes? Building on some specific case studies, chosen for their significance, we aim at addressing these issues particularly focusing on the spatial dimension and corporeality, which—despite being almost neglected by previous research in this field—play a crucial role in such dynamics. The inclusion of both a *desk* and a *field* analysis, moreover, reveals the intention of using the same research as a sort of testing ground for particular semiotic tools and perspectives, finally providing the reader with some epistemological remarks related to the role of semiotics within the field of *food studies*.

Keywords: food, ethnic, semiotics, translation, culture

[Italian]

Il cibo dell'Altro.

Un approccio semiotico alla traduzione del codice alimentare

Il cibo, e più in generale l'alimentazione, sono stati spesso paragonati al linguaggio e alla comunicazione: dal punto di vista antropologico, l'alimentazione costituisce senza dubbio uno dei primi fabbisogni dell'umanità. D'altra parte, come sostiene Roland Barthes (1961), tale necessità è altamente strutturata e coinvolge diverse sostanze, tecniche e usi, che entrano a far parte di un sistema di differenze significative. È in questo senso che è possibile parlare di una *semiotica del cibo*: lungi dal coincidere semplicemente con questioni di ordine fisiologico o percettivo, l'alimentazione è anche e soprattutto questione dei diversi comportamenti, discorsi e immagini che la avvolgono e la accompagnano (Pezzini 2006). Il cibo non è soltanto un insieme di sostanze utili e necessarie al sostentamento dell'organismo, ma un vero e proprio sistema di segni legato a particolari processi di significazione e interpretazione. In particolare, il codice alimentare può essere concepito come un *linguaggio* nel quale si traduce la struttura di una società, nonché come una sorta di "deposito" dell'identità personale e collettiva (Lévi-Strauss 1967; Montanari 2006). In quanto tale, il cibo non solo è strumento di identità culturale, ma il primo modo, forse, per entrare in contatto con culture diverse (Montanari 2006). Questo è particolarmente evidente nelle società contemporanee, dove lo sviluppo di nuove tecnologie di comunicazione e le innovazioni nel campo dei trasporti hanno causato una serie di sovrapposizioni e interdipendenze a livello economico, sociale, politico, tecnologico e culturale. Simili processi di ibridazione hanno coinvolto in misura sempre maggiore anche l'universo alimentare, causando l'incontro e lo scontro tra diverse sfere gastronomiche e culinarie. I flussi migratori, il turismo e i moderni sistemi di comunicazione espongono continuamente le *identità* alimentari locali a una serie di *alterità* legate a diversi sistemi alimentari, innescando

interessanti dinamiche di trasformazione e “traduzione” che ri-formano e ri-definiscono incessantemente simili identità e alterità. Il cibo etnico, inoltre, costituisce una presenza ormai ineludibile nell’attuale panorama alimentare delle società occidentali: dai numerosi *döner kebab* che popolano le strade in cui camminiamo ai molteplici *sushi bar* e ai sempre più presenti ristoranti eritrei, senegalesi o asiatici, l’offerta di *cibo dell’Altro* è estremamente vasta e variegata. Senza dimenticare i vari negozi etnici, in progressivo aumento, o i mercati cittadini, dove ai prodotti nostrani si affiancano sempre più sovente spezie, ortaggi e altri alimenti essenziali per la preparazione di molti piatti esotici. Questo stesso fenomeno, inoltre, è progressivamente diventato popolare anche nella grande distribuzione: in Nord America e in Europa, per esempio, gli ultimi decenni hanno portato a una sempre maggiore inclusione di cibi stranieri sugli scaffali dei supermercati, talvolta in sezioni specificamente dedicate al cibo etnico, talaltra accanto ai più comuni prodotti locali.

La presente ricerca intende riflettere su simili fenomeni, cercando di decifrare e analizzare i processi di *traduzione del codice alimentare*. Cosa succede al cibo, ma anche agli usi, le pratiche e i significati a esso associati, quando vengono trasportati da un universo alimentare a un altro? Quali sono gli aspetti principali che intervengono in simili dinamiche? E come può la semiotica intervenire nell’analisi e nella comprensione di tali processi? In base all’analisi di alcuni casi di studio, selezionati per la loro significatività, ci si propone di affrontare simili questioni rivolgendo particolare attenzione alla *dimensione spaziale* e alla *corporeità* – che, pur essendo state largamente trascurate dagli studi realizzati in tale ambito, giocano un ruolo fondamentale in queste dinamiche. Infine, l’inclusione di un’analisi di tipo *field* oltre che *desk* rivela l’intenzione di utilizzare la stessa ricerca come una sorta di banco di prova per particolari strumenti e prospettive metodologiche, così da offrire in chiusura alcune osservazioni di carattere epistemologico sul ruolo della semiotica nell’ambito dei cosiddetti *food studies*.

Parole chiave: cibo, etnico, semiotica, traduzione, cultura

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*To each journey I have made and I will make,
for making me discover wonderful places and lovely people,
as well as myself*

“To really get to know someone
you should eat, sleep, and travel together”

Persian Proverb

“If we put together many branches and great quantity of leaves,
we still cannot understand the forest.
But if we know how to walk through the forest of culture with our eyes open,
confidently following the numerous paths which criss-cross it,
not only shall we be able to understand better the vastness and complexity of the forest,
but we shall also be able to discover the nature of the leaves
and branches of every single tree”

Umberto Eco

INTRODUCTION

“Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are” (Brillat-Savarin 1825). This aphorism by Brillat-Savarin has become very famous and omnipresent, from the numerous cooking blogs inhabiting the Internet to the most popular mass media communications, passing through the prosperous scholarly research on food and taste. Actually food represents an unalienable component of our life, embracing different spheres and moments. From the need of nourishing our body to the pleasure related to *gourmandise*, from the sharing and transmission of “traditional” homemade cooking recipes to the world’s most renowned chefs’ formulas, from TV shows to the recently born phenomenon known as *Foodporn*, also including many other rituals, techniques, and behaviours, food is at the centre of most of the experiences we live every day. What is more, through it we express our *taste*, that is, both “the sense by which [we distinguish] the qualities and flavour of a substance” (Collins 2014) and our “preference or liking for something” (*ibid.*) (cf. also Landowski and Fiorin 1998). Taken adequate distance from any kind of determinism, the formula introduced by Brillat-Savarin in his *Physiologie du goût*¹ (1825) is therefore still extremely topical in its references to the issue of the relation between food and cultural identity. Food preferences, taboos, and habits, by revealing our taste, express our same identity. Moreover, as we live in an increasingly globalised world, characterised by a number of hybridisation processes, the crossing and overlapping among different “food identities” has become evident and consistent, unceasingly relating *identity* to *alterity*.

¹ English Translation *The Physiology of Taste*, 1949.

It becomes therefore essential to consider and investigate the links existing between the signs, texts, discourses, and practices concerning the food universe, on the one hand, and the processes of construction and the forms of expression of cultural identity—or, better, *identities*—, on the other hand. But what does dealing with such issues mean? What are the main topics that should be taken into consideration and examined? Which disciplines are more inclined to fit with such a perspective of research? And which methodologies of analysis should be preferred? Evidently, such questions open the way to a large debate, recalling different disciplines, methodologies, and perspectives.

For instance, food is a crucial aspect of *religious identity*: from food taboos to the offerings of specific products to the gods, from the Eucharist host to the Vedic *yajña*, from the periods of fasting to the episodes narrated by various sacred texts, religion is full of signs, texts, and practices in which food plays a key role. It is essential, therefore, to consider the relation between food and religious identities: how does the food-material emerge as a religious sign? Which rituals and practices are related to such a transformation? What are the effects of meaning that it causes? And how to describe and analyse such processes? The same topics could be also addressed with respect to *gender* and *social class* issues, or rather *ethnic identities*, considering food as a *language* unconsciously translating the structure of a particular society or group (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1965). Another interesting field of analysis concerns *taste*, which goes beyond the individual perception, and embraces, instead, an intersubjective and sociocultural level. In addition to the gustatory experience, it would be essential to consider *commensality*, which, beyond the material and physical dimension of food experiences, refers both to the symbolic space characterising them and to the roles and forms related to eating. Finally, much can be said about the *languages* and forms of *communication* referring to the food universe: from cinema and TV shows to various forms of art, from the so-called enogastronomic tourism to cooking blogs, from photography to fashion, from food design to literature, food is at the centre of many discourses that “communicate”, “shape”, and “analyse” it, investing it with multiple values, and inserting it in multiform narrative programmes. What are the traces left by such discourses? And how do such traces and discourses affect our perception of foods and different eating experiences?

Finally, what are mass and new media's capabilities with respect to the representation of food and taste, and especially of their cultural dimension?

These are just some of the numerous issues that could be addressed with respect to the food universe and which have been partially taken into consideration by different branches of learning, such as, for example, anthropology, sociology, history of food, and partially semiotics. Despite the differences concerning their methodological tools and aims, as well as the peculiarities of the multiple approaches characterising each branch, all these disciplines show several points of connection with regard to the analysis of food-related issues, suggesting the need for complementing and comparing their results and perspectives in a constructive and fruitful dialogue.

Building on this observation, the present work aims at proposing a *semiotic* approach to food, meditating on its abilities to take part in such a field of research. Recalling the theorisations and analyses produced by some of the most prominent exponents in this field, we will try to retrace the different stages of semiotic investigation upon the food universe, embracing both traditional approaches and more recent methodologies and researches. After pointing out the main strengths and weaknesses of each approach, we will propose a research aiming at dealing with some issues which have been, so far, mostly neglected or just very partially taken into consideration by semioticians and other scholars.

Particularly, we will address a phenomenon that is extremely topical as it concerns many contemporary foodspheres: the *food of the Other*, as the same title of this work suggests. Either eagerly exalted or strongly criticised, globalisation is a factual characteristic of contemporary world: the development of new technologies of communication and the advances in transportation have caused a process of international integration and crossing, enhancing the interchange and interdependence of world views, products, economic activities, ideas, and other aspects of culture (cf. in particular Albrow and King 1990; Al-Rodhan and Stoudmann 2006). Such hybridisation processes have increasingly affected food, causing the crossing and overlapping of different *foodspheres*. Migrations, travels, and communications unceasingly expose local food identities to food alterities, activating interesting processes of transformation and

“translation” which continuously re-shape and re-define such identities and alterities. Ethnic food, moreover, has become a fundamental presence in western food cultures: from the several *döner kebabs* filling up the streets where we walk to the many *sushi* bars and the more and more present Eritrean, Senegalese, or Asiatic restaurants, the offer of “the food of the Other” in our societies is extremely wide and varied. Ethnic shops (such as *halal* butchers, Chinese bakeries, or Mexican stores) are increasing in number, and in many city markets the local products are increasingly complemented with spices, vegetables, and other foods required for the preparation of exotic dishes. This same phenomenon, furthermore, has progressively become popular even in the large retail: in North America and Europe, for example, recent decades have seen the growth of foreign foods on supermarket shelves, sometimes in sections specifically devoted to ethnic food (e.g. soy noodles, Mexican *tortillas*, *chili* sauce, spring rolls, or sushi), and sometimes even next to local and more common products (e.g. basmati rice, coconut milk, or exotic fruits).

The aim of the present research is precisely to meditate on such phenomena, trying to decipher and analyse the processes of *translation of the culinary code*. What happens to foods and food-related habits, practices, and meanings when they are carried from a foodsphere to another one? What are the main aspects intervening in such dynamics? And how can semiotics help understanding such processes? These are the main issues we will deal with in the following pages.

Specifically, Chapter 1 will address a crucial question: why is a semiotics of food needed and useful? Building on the works produced by some influential scholars, e.g. Roland Barthes, we will point out how food should not be conceived only in terms of a substance for survival and nourishment, but also and rather as part of a sign system which is strictly involved in processes of signification. After exploring the details of such issue, we will propose a brief examination of the main works dealing with food symbolism and the food system: particularly, paragraph 1.3 will be devoted to the main representatives of Structuralism (Lévi-Strauss, Douglas, Barthes, and Bourdieu), while paragraph 1.4 will deal with the main criticisms toward such approach, introducing the works of the main exponents of the so-called Developmentalism (Goody, Mennell, and

Mintz). The second part of the chapter will present some of the most renowned and important studies concerning food, ranging from taste and recipes to arts and literature, from mass media and cinema to commensality and its roles. Even if such analyses have successfully shown the importance of applying semiotics to food-related issues, we will highlight the need for enhancing and further developing such field of research. The last paragraph will therefore propose some hypotheses concerning the role of semiotics within food studies, trying to individuate the main issues which seem in need to be urgently dealt with (e.g. food hybridisation, globalisation dynamics, the role of spatial and corporeal dimensions, etc.) and pointing out the need for complementing the more traditional approaches, e.g. structuralism and text semiotics, to the new branches focusing on the observation of practices, social dynamics, and other tools of analysis. Moreover, attention will be drawn to interdisciplinarity, recalling the importance of connecting semiotics with the other disciplines (such as anthropology, sociology, history of food, etc.) that have traditionally dealt with food.

Chapter 2 will focus on methodology: in order not to get lost in the variety and variability of such a complex phenomenon and such a composite set of methodological approaches, we will proceed to the definition of some parameters for the analysis and its object, as well as to a brief description of the methodologies underlying the research. The chapter will therefore take into consideration the main issues related to semiotics of culture, sociosemiotics, and ethnosemiotics, trying to combine the renowned European tradition with a broader perspective including the contributions given by some of the most prominent international scholars. Special attention will be paid to the inclusion of practices and the concept of textuality.

Chapter 3 will introduce the criteria for the construction of the examined corpus, as well as the tools and the structure of the analysis. The ethnic meal will be considered as it is consumed in western public restaurants, particularly focusing our attention on the dinner, according to a main aspect, that is, the conception of the meal as a moment of enjoyment and relax. Specifically, we will consider those cases where the quality and costs of the service make it more plausible that the choice of the restaurant (by the consumers) is not due to economical or practical reasons, but, rather, to a real interest—

or even just a sort of curiosity—in a particular type of ethnic food or eating experience. After clarifying the double structure of the research (“desk analysis” and “field analysis”), the main aspects underlying the establishment of the examined corpus will be set, explaining “what” (the Japanese foodsphere), “why” (e.g. authenticity and symbolism), “when” (April 2011–November 2013), and “where” (Canada, Italy, and Switzerland, according to specific criteria) was taken into consideration for the analysis. The final paragraph will highlight the intention of focusing principally on the “eater”, that is, more on the side of consumption than that of production, giving priority to the spatial and corporeal dimension.

Chapter 4 will deal with the *desk analysis*: the opening paragraph will present the main features of *washoku*, the traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, ranging from ingredients to cooking techniques, from the tableware to the dining environment, from utensils to *umami*. Particular attention will be devoted to chopsticks, which will be analysed through the semiotic lens, comparing them with the Western common cutlery. Paragraph 4.3 will introduce another concept that is central not only to *washoku* but, more generally speaking, to the Japanese semiosphere: *tsutsumi*, which is generally translated as “wrapping”. After presenting the main features and areas of interest of the “wrapping principle”, we will adopt this idea as a key criterion for the analysis of the same Japanese foodsphere, leading to interesting observations as regards to the semantic level. Finally, the last paragraphs will draw the attention to rice, the staple of Japanese cuisine, and particularly to *sushi*, which is generally recognised as the most representative element of *washoku*. The description of the most common typologies of sushi, including some of its Western variations, will open the way to their semiotic analysis, where the concept of wrapping will play again an essential role.

Chapter 5 will deal with the *field analysis*: six significant case studies, chosen according to the premises discussed in Chapter 3, will be firstly introduced and analysed with respect to their logos and signs, which represent crucial systems of their visual identity. Paragraph 5.2 will draw the attention to the textual dimension of the menu, considering not only its linguistic and visual dimension, but also the syntagmatic and paradigmatic level, as well as the practices concerning it. By contrast, paragraph 5.3 will

be devoted to the analysis of the spatial dimension: three different levels of observation, individuated through a “zoom movement”, will be described and carefully examined in separate sections. From the macro-level of the eating place and the practices related to it, the analysis will progressively approach the intermediate level of the table and proxemic patterns, finally reaching the micro-level of plates and food, considered not only in their internal configuration but also—and above all—with respect to the “techniques of the body” (Mauss 1934) and the practices of the subjects whose images they presuppose, but who at the same time modify them. With respect to all these dimensions, we will consider different elements, ranging from material aspects to visual configurations, narrative dynamics, and proxemic patterns. Every section will include a conclusion, while more general considerations will be offered in the closing of the chapter, where particular attention will be paid to the spatial and the corporeal dimensions, as well as to the crucial role they play within the ethnic eating experience.

Finally, we will present the general conclusions of the research. Building on the results of the desk and field analyses, Chapter 6 will propose some epistemological remarks related to the role of semiotics within the field of food studies. Particularly, recalling what stated in the first chapters, we will meditate on the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches, pointing out if, how, and to what extent they have proved to be useful for the different stages of the present analysis. Secondly, we will introduce the main outcomes of the research, leading the focus of attention to translation processes and cultural dynamics. In the end, the still open questions resulting from the here proposed research will be presented, tracing the path for future developments in food-related semiotic studies.

SECTION 1
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

CHAPTER 1 – TOWARD A SEMIOTICS OF FOOD

Abstract

Chapter 1 opens with a crucial question: why is a semiotics of food needed and useful? Food is not only a substance for survival and nourishment, but is also part of a sign system as it is strictly involved in processes of signification. After exploring this issue, the chapter proposes a brief examination of the main contributions dealing with food symbolism and the food system: paragraph 1.3 is devoted to the main representatives of Structuralism, while paragraph 1.4 deals with the main criticisms toward such approach, introducing the works of the main exponents of the so-called Developmentalism. The second part of the chapter presents some of the most renowned and important studies concerning food, ranging from taste and recipes to arts and literature, from mass media and cinema to commensality and its roles. Even if such analyses have successfully shown the importance of applying semiotics to food-related issues, there is still much to do. The last paragraph therefore proposes some hypotheses concerning the role of semiotics within food studies, trying to individuate the main issues which seem in need to be urgently dealt with (e.g. food hybridisation, globalisation dynamics, translation processes, the role of spatial and corporeal dimensions, etc.) and pointing out the need for complementing the more traditional approaches, e.g. structuralism and text semiotics, to the new branches focusing on the observation of practices, social dynamics, and other tools of analysis. Moreover, attention is drawn to interdisciplinarity, suggesting the importance of connecting semiotics with the other disciplines (such as anthropology, sociology, history of food, etc.) that have traditionally dealt with food.

1.1 Introduction: Why a Semiotics of Food?

Eating and food are often compared to language and communication: in *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption* Roland Barthes states that food

Is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior. (1961 [ET 1997], 21)

Anthropologically speaking, food is undoubtedly the primary need. Nevertheless, as the French semiologist defends, this need is highly structured, and it involves substances, practices, habits, and techniques of preparation and consumption that are part of a system of differences in signification (*ibid.*, 21-22). Once satisfied, therefore, the first human need “develops beyond its own ends, replacing, summing up, and signaling other behaviors, and it is precisely for these reasons that it is a sign” (*ibid.*, 25).

In this sense we can speak about a *semiotics of food*: far from simply coinciding with material needs or physiological and perceptive processes, nutrition concerns “all the various activities, discourses, and images that surround and are associated with it” (Pezzini 2006, 150 [translation mine]). Food is not only a substance for survival and nourishment, but is also part of a sign system as it is strictly involved in processes of signification and interpretation.

1.2 Edible vs. Non-Edible: from Cultural Materialism to Classificatory Thinking

The first aspect that identifies how strictly food is related to semiosis is the distinction between what is edible and what is not. According to Claude Fischler (1980; 1990), one of the peculiarities of human beings’ relation to food is the so-called “classificatory thinking” (*pensée classificatrice*). Every culture selects, within a wide range of products

with nutritional capacity, a more or less large quantity destined to become, for such culture, *food*. In Thailand, Cambodia and many Asian countries people consume *larvae*, locusts, and other insects. In Peru it is common to eat hamster and llama's meat. In Africa and Australia some tribes consume snakes. By contrast, these same habits would probably sound odd, or at least unfamiliar, to European or North American inhabitants. As mentioned above, human beings eat, first of all, to survive. But in the social sphere, food assumes meanings that transcend its basic function and affect perceptions of edibility (cf. Danesi 2004, 194).

Some scholars have tried to connect the process of distinction between edible and non-edible to more or less functionalist and materialistic theories. The best known approach is Marvin Harris' *cultural materialism*, according to which "human social life is a response to the practical problems of earthly existence" (2001[1979], XV). In *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture* (1985), the American anthropologist presents different examples to show that all food taboos and prescriptions can be justified in terms of *ecological advantage*. The alleged irrationality of cultures thus disappears up against the corroborated rationality of the processes of adaptation that are beyond the consciousness of individuals: the Jewish and Islamic prohibition to eat pork, as well as the Hindu choice of not ingesting beef, or the Western taboo concerning the consumption of insects are related to ecological and health reasons, although they are usually explained in religious or symbolic terms. Building on Robert Merton's theory of functionalism and the distinction between manifest and latent functions (1949), Harris aims at showing that, even if from the point of view of social actors food habits, taboos, and prescriptions can be attributed to the symbolic dimension, the real base of human beings' distinction between edible and inedible refers to material, ecological, and nutritional factors. In other words, every cultural or symbolic trait should be considered as the other face of a beneficial adaptation, although people who benefit from it are not generally able to rationalise this process.

In contrast, according to Fischler (1980; 1990) and other prominent scholars, the transformation of natural nutrients into food cannot be reduced to simple *utilitarian rationality* (Harris 1985) or *availability logics* (Sahlins 1976). This process is part of a

classification system (Douglas 1972), and it should be rather referred to a different type of rationality, which is strictly related to symbolic representations. The biological need for nourishment is inserted in a system of values, and, either according to a totemic (Lévi-Strauss 1962a), a sacrificial (Détienne and Vernant 1979), a hygienic-rationalist (as in Western dietetics), or an aesthetic (as in gastronomy) logic, all cultures develop a system according to which all products with nutritional capacity are divided into two categories: *edible* and *inedible*.

1.3 Food Symbolism and the Structuralist Approach: Claude Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, Roland Barthes, and Pierre Bourdieu

If Harris stresses the importance of material and rational reasons underlying food habits and prescriptions, other scholars have pointed out how strictly food is related to the symbolic dimension. Among them, the most influential works in recent decades are the structural analyses developed by anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss (1964; 1966; 1968; 1971) and Mary Douglas (1966; 1972; 1975; 1984), by the semiologist Roland Barthes (1961), and by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1979).

1.3.1 From Nature to Culture: Lévi-Strauss and the Analysis of Food Symbolism

Despite covering a small part of Lévi-Strauss' total work, his writings on food have been very influential. His first venture in this domain is contained in *Anthropologie Structurale*¹ (1958), where, considering the contrasts between English and French cooking, he introduces the concept of “gusteme” in order to present the analogy between *cuisine* and language:

¹ English Translation *Structural Anthropology*, 1963.

Like language, it seems to me, the cuisine of a society may be analysed into constituent elements, which in this case we might call ‘gustemes’, and which may be organised according to certain structures of opposition and correlation. ([ET 1963], 85)

The anthropologist then distinguishes English cooking from French cooking through three oppositions: *endogenous* / *exogenous* (national vs. exotic ingredients), *central* / *peripheral* (staple food vs. accompaniments), and *marked* / *not marked* (savoury vs. bland). Building on these categories, he concludes that in the English meal the main dishes imply the use of local ingredients cooked in a relatively bland way, while the side dishes are generally more strongly flavoured and of exotic origin. On the other hand, in French cooking strong flavours are characteristic of both central dishes and accompaniments, so the opposition exotic vs. endogenous is not accentuated.

In the first volume of his *Mitologiques, Le Cru et le Cuit*² (1964), Lévi-Strauss defines cookery as a “technical activity” ensuring a transition between Nature and Culture, thus referring to the fact that man is at the same time both a biological being and a social individual, and by cooking the “raw” he transforms it in a cultural product with strong symbolic meanings. This analysis is reinforced in the second volume, *Du Miel aux Cendres*³ (1966), where the French anthropologist compares different myths to introduce the antithesis between honey and tobacco (which have great significance for the tribes he studies) as the manifestation of fundamental oppositions of thinking, thus linking oral folklore and social customs and values. The third volume, *L’Origine des manières de table*⁴ (1968), and the fourth, *L’Homme Nu*⁵ (1971), focus on the differences between the previously analysed South American myths and the new introduced North American ones, presenting a discussion on morals, numeration, and the origin of the novel, and

² English Translation *The Raw and the Cooked*, 1969.

³ English Translation *From Honey to Ashes*, 1973.

⁴ English Translation *The Origin of Table Manners*, 1978.

⁵ English Translation *The Naked Man*, 1981.

stressing how, despite changing its content, a myth can retain its structural principles.

Beyond the peculiarities of each tome, the main point concerning food symbolism is the idea of a correlation between certain conceptual pairs related to food, such as raw *vs.* cooked, and the corresponding oppositions on the semantic level, such as Nature *vs.* Culture. This leads Lévi-Strauss to formulate the so-called *culinary triangle* (1964; 1965) depicted in Fig. 1.

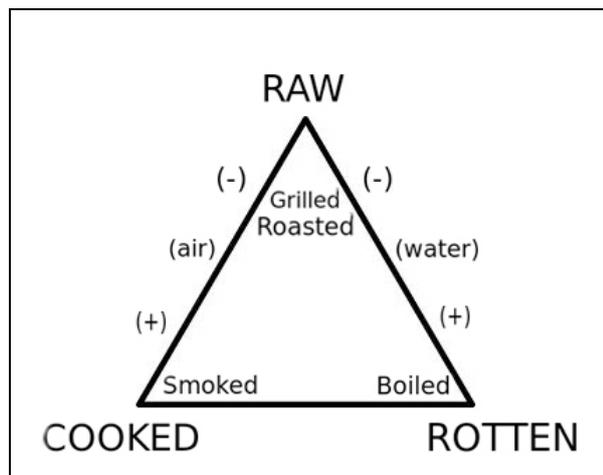


Figure 1 – The culinary triangle by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1964; 1965).

The French anthropologist theorises that cooking presumes a system that is located within a triangular semantic field, whose three vertexes correspond to the categories of the *raw*, the *cooked*, and the *rotten*. With regard to cooking processes, the raw represents the unmarked pole, while the other two vertexes are strongly marked, although oppositely: the cooked is a cultural transformation of the raw, though the rotten is its natural modification. The triangle reveals therefore a double opposition: “elaborate” *vs.* “unelaborate”, on the one hand, and “Culture” *vs.* “Nature”, on the other hand.

Building on this scheme, Lévi-Strauss distinguishes various modes of cooking: *roasted* food is directly exposed to the fire, with which it realises an unmediated conjunction, while *boiled* food is doubly mediated (by the water in which it is

immersed, and by the container that holds both water and food). The roasted could be therefore located on the side of Nature, whereas the boiled on the side of Culture, as it implies the use of a cultural object, which is the receptacle (*literal level*), and requires the mediation of water between food and fire (*symbolic level*). The other opposition recalled by these two modes of cooking is the one between *elaborate* and *unelaborate*: the roasted would correspond to the raw (unelaborate), as it is never uniformly cooked, while the boiled to the rotten, as the linguistic examples cited by Lévi-Strauss proves. The French scholar then identifies the third lacking term, corresponding to the cooked (the elaborate), with the *smoked*, which recalls the roasted as it implies an unmediated process, but at the same time differs from it as it is, like the boiled, a uniform and penetrating in depth form of cooking. Concerning the similarities and differences between smoking and roasting, then, Lévi-Strauss points out that, even if in both cases nothing is interposed between food and fire except the air, in the first one the air is brought to a maximum, while in the second one it is reduced to a minimum. According to this observation, he identifies two differentials that can be expressed by the oppositions *close/distant* and *rapid/slow*, enhanced by a third differential, created by the *presence* (the wooden frame used for smoking) or *absence* (roasting) of a cultural object. In this way, the smoked is related to the boiled, even if, on the other hand, boiling is opposed both to smoking and roasting with regard to the presence or absence of water.

Finally, the French scholar analyses the various contradictions intrinsic to the triangle and the relationships among its vertexes, then coming to open the discussion to other cooking techniques, such as the *grilled*, the *steamed*, and the *fried* (for which a tetrahedron should rather replace the previously used triangle). He also mentions the possible differentiation between animal and vegetable foodstuffs cooking methods, finally stressing the importance of diachronic factors such as the order, the presentation, and the gestures of the meal, as well as of the sociological, economic, aesthetic, and religious oppositions that should be taken into account for a proper analysis of a culinary system: male/female,

family/society, village/bush, sacred/profane, etc. By taking into consideration all these variables, as Lévi-Strauss concludes, “we can hope to discover for each specific case how the cooking of a society is a language in which it unconsciously translates its structure” (1965 [ET 1997], 35), representing on the level of expression certain systems of values, social relations, religious beliefs, and ideological convictions.

1.3.2 Mary Douglas: Meals, Drinks, and Religious Taboos

Despite sharing Lévi-Strauss’ conviction that food categories encode social events, Mary Douglas (1972) reproaches the French scholar to erroneously expect to find universal food meanings common to all mankind through the analysis of very restricted societies, as well as to rely entirely on the resources of binary analysis, affording no procedures to validate the meanings that his technical apparatus produces. She stresses the importance of considering the binary pairs according to their position in a series, that is, in their *syntagmatic* relations. Building on the analogy between eating and talking, which are both patterned activities, she tries therefore to analyse the framework of categories for the description of eating, considering the foods and the dishes that compose the several meals throughout the day, the week, and the year.

After describing the characteristics of such a grammar, the British anthropologist points out the relevant food categories in her social environment,⁶ individuating two major contrasted groups: *meals* and *drinks*. Meals are structured—according to the grammar described in *Deciphering a Meal* (1972)—and named in their sequence (early, main, light), and they presuppose the use of at least one mouth-entering utensil per head, as well as a table, a particular seating order, and cultural restrictions both on movement and on alternative activities (such as reading the newspaper). A meal also incorporates a series of contrasts: hot

⁶ “Certain segment of the middle class in London”, as she clarifies (1972, 69).

and cold, bland and spiced, liquid and semi-liquid, and various textures. Finally, meals are likely to be organized in scale of importance and sumptuousness through the week and the year, according to a structure that recalls a sort of metonym: “the smallest, meanest meal figures the structure of the grandest, and each unit of the grand meal figures again the whole meal—or the meanest meal” (*ibid.*, 67). The opposition between meals and drinks also reflects differences in social relationships: drinks are generally available to strangers, acquaintances, and family. On the other hand, meals are reserved for family, close friends, and honoured guests.

First in *Purity and Danger* (1966) and then in *Deciphering a Meal* (1972), Mary Douglas also focuses on the Mosaic rejection of certain animal kinds, trying to suggest a rational pattern for the considered taboos. Considering the three sets of abominable beasts established by the Mosaic code (Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14), she aims at interpreting the same meaning of abomination within it. Initially she recalls the division among the three spheres of land, air, and water, as well as the criteria on the base of which animals pertaining to such domains or hanging in the balance are not to be touched or eaten, or fit for the table, but not for the altar. She comes then to draw some diagrams, finally comparing them with the ones representing the rules regulating Israelites’ access to the temple. Her conclusion is that there is a very clear analogy between humans and animals, on the one hand, and between the classification of animals according to holiness and the relationship between the temple’s holiness and the body’s purity, on the other one. This analogy also recalls what previously pointed out with relation to home meals:

Lay these rules and their patternings in a straight perspective, each one looking forward and backward to all the others, and we get the same repetition of metonyms that we found to be the key to the full meaning of the categories of food in the home. (Douglas 1972, 76)

Douglas then considers the Mosaic rule according to which meat must be drained

of its blood before consumption (Leviticus 17:10; Deuteronomy 12: 23-7), recalling again the idea of purity and the general analogy between body and temple:

The draining of blood from meat is a ritual act which figures the bloody sacrifice at the altar. Meat is thus transformed from a living creature into a food item.
(Douglas 1972, 78)

Finally, the anthropologist analyses the third Hebrew dietary law, consisting in the total separation of meat from milk and the consequent minute specialisation of utensils (Exodus 23: 19; 34: 26; Deuteronomy 14). This argument permits her to respond to Tambiah and Bulmer's criticisms to her first analysis outlined in *Purity and Danger* (1966), comparing the special taxonomic status she individuated for the pig to the Israelites to that of the otter in Thailand, and so coming to point out that "the common meal, decoded, [...] summarizes a stern, tragic religion" (Douglas 1972, 79).

Much more could be said about Douglas' contribution to food studies, also considering other interesting works such as *Food in the Social Order* (1984), but in this short review it is sufficient to consider how, through her different analyses, she has been able to point out the strong relationship interrelating food and *social codes*.

1.3.3 Roland Barthes and the "Grammar" of Food

Having stated that food is a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviours, Roland Barthes (1961) tries to individuate its constituent units. He suggests to begin by gathering all the possible information about food in a given society (products, techniques, habits), and then examining these facts according to what linguistics call *transformational analysis*,

that is, observing “whether the passage from one fact to another produces a difference in signification” (168).

He considers some examples related to the contemporary French context, such as the passage from ordinary bread (signifying day-to-day life) to milk loaf (recalling the party) and the changeover from white bread to brown bread (with the latter paradoxically becoming a sign of refinement), and the American one, considering oppositions such as bitter vs. sweet flavours (which is associated with a contrast between upper and lower classes) and sweet vs. crisp foods. According to the French semiologist, the individuation and comparison of such oppositions, therefore, would make it possible to compare the food grammars of different countries, as “food is an organic system, organically integrated into its specific type of civilization” (*ibid.*, 25).

1.3.4 Pierre Bourdieu: Food and Social Stratification

In *La Distinction*⁷ (1979), Bourdieu focuses on different aspects of behaviour—such as music, clothing, cosmetic preferences, furniture, visual arts, and food—that are often attributed to individual taste, but at the same time recognised as being related to social stratification. Considering the different classes and sub-classes of society, the French sociologist aims at finding the principles underlying the cultural preferences of each group:

It is necessary to establish for each class and sub-class [...] the generative formula of the habitus which retranslates into a particular style of life the characteristic necessities and facilities of that (relatively) homogenous class of conditions of existence” principles beneath the cultural preferences of each group. (*ibid.*, 230)

⁷ English Translation *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 1984.

Building on extensive social survey data, Bourdieu concludes that food, like clothes, furniture, and other aspects of the behaviour are part of social life, and, as such, they are subject to “precocious apprenticeship”, as they are not remoulded through education but remain closely conditioned by the class or sub-class of origin.

1.4 The Limits of Structuralism and the Developmental Approach: Goody, Mennell, and Mintz

The great virtue of structuralism is that “it clearly recognises that taste is culturally shaped and socially controlled” (Mennell 1985, 6). By contrast, the structuralist approach has been strongly criticised for being rigid and unable to catch social changes. Norbert Elias (1939a; 1939b; 1969) connects this inability to what he calls “process-reduction”, that is, the tendency in Western thought to look for static and constant *formulae*, codes, or deep structures underlying the flux and change of the social sphere. According to Stephen Mennell, Anne Murcott and Anneke H. van Otterloo (1992), another weakness of structuralism is that, while avoiding any suspicion of ethnocentrism,

It moves so far to the pole of extreme cultural relativism that it overlooks any possibility of explaining different habits – particularly their origins – in terms of purpose, function or utility.
(8)

These criticisms have led some scholars to adopt a different approach, consistent with Marvin Harris’ cultural materialism: the so-called “developmentalism” (*ibid.*). Despite sharing a dissatisfaction with the structuralist perspective, the developmentalists—whose main representatives are Goody, Mennell, and Mintz—do not at all negate the power of the symbolic meanings of food in shaping and regulating social behaviour (cf. Mennell,

Murcott and van Otterloo 1992, 14), thus partly distancing from Harris' view. On the other hand, criticising structuralism's static nature, the developmental approach suggests that tastes and behaviours change over time as a result of the developments occurred in previous generations. According to the developmentalists, social change is the mechanism that determines cultural preferences, so it is essential to understand why and how meanings attached to food have come to be as they are.

Jack Goody, in *Cooking, Cuisine and Class* (1982), focuses on the reasons why a "high" (elite) or "low" (peasant) cuisine emerges in some societies instead of others. Arguing that it cannot be merely a matter of degrees of social and political complexity, he compares two North Ghanaian tribes—the Lo Dagaa and the Gonja—and notes that, despite many differences of social structure in general, and in foodstuffs in particular, the shape of the cuisine in both societies is surprisingly similar. Then Goody turns to those societies for which differentiation of cuisine is a hallmark (India, Ancient Egypt, China, western Europe, and Africa), also considering the role of literacy in the differentiation of the high and the low both in social structures and cuisines.

On the other hand, Stephen Mennell (1985) concentrates on the differentiation between a (primarily female dominated) domestic cuisine and a (primarily male dominated) professional *haute cuisine*, comparing France and England in their social development. Another argument he supports is that taste in eating, such as appetite itself (Mennell 1986; 1987), is formed according to what Norbert Elias (1939a; 1939b; 1969) more generally noted for the shaping of personality make-up:

The transition from the medieval oscillation between feasting and fasting, plenty and want, to ne emphasis on discrimination at table parallels – indeed in an aspect of – the broader shift in the balance between external constraints and self-constraints. In early modern Europe, food supplies improved; but, more than that, the extension of trade, the progressive division of labour and the process of state formation and internal pacification improved the *security* of food supplies (Mennell, Murcott and van Otterloo 1992, 17).

Finally, Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* (1985), which is a study of the supply of and demand for sugar, comes to the same conclusions of Goody and Mennell, although making reference to a different theoretical framework—the world-system theory. Analysing the development of European sugar-cane plantations in the West Indies and elsewhere from the early sixteenth century and the creation of the modern European and North American sugar mass market, he points out how this product abandoned its connotation as a luxury and rarity to become the first mass-produced exotic necessity of a proletarian class. He also highlights that the huge increase of its use can only be explained considering the interaction through time of economic interests, political power, nutritional requirements, and cultural meanings.

1.5 Food as a Language: From Culinary Grammar to Translation Processes

Beyond structuralism's weaknesses and the choice of focusing more on social changes or symbolic values, it is undeniable that food and cooking represent a language to the extent they express social and cultural configurations, and possess a particular grammar.

As mentioned above, there have been different attempts to decode this grammar, as well as to understand the meaning underlying food habits and avoidances (structuralists) or their changes over time (developmentalists). Another interesting research examining food as language is Roman Jakobson's *Szczupak po polsku* (1965, 782-791), where the author analyses the difference between the Polish and Bohemian medieval recipes for pike, recalling the architectural and poetical frame of that period. Also Algirdas Julien Greimas, in *La Soupe au pistou: ou la Construction d'un objet de valeur* (1983b), explores the grammatical structures underlying recipes and plates, focusing on the Provençal soup.

Apart from the cited attempts of decoding food grammar and behaviours, it is interesting to note that, as language, "cooking contains and expresses the culture of those

who practice it; it is the depository of the group tradition and identity” (Montanari 2006, VII [translation mine]). As such, Massimo Montanari states, “it is not only an instrument of cultural identity, but perhaps the first way to come into contact with different cultures. [...] More than language, food is a mediator among different cultures, opening the cooking systems to all sorts of inventions, intersections and contaminations”(ibid.).

But if food is a language that reflects the structure of a society as well as a form of encounter between different cultures, how does the process of “translation” between a sociocultural system and another take place? According to Montanari (1997, 121-22), as cooking is not a random assemblage of elements, but a unified and coherent system, there is a substantial difficulty in accepting, and sometimes even understanding the Other. Hence there is the need to “filter” what is unknown through one’s own system of values, thus frequently distorting it, or at least adjusting it, reducing it to one’s own criteria. The Italian scholar supports this argument with the example of the 15th and 16th century European explorers and conquerors’ attitude toward the gastronomic universe of the New World:

[They] find it hard [...] to focus, to theoretically ‘classify’ the new experiences. Their descriptions always aim at ‘translating’ such experiences into their own language, to bring them back as part of their culture. Consider, for example [...] the anonymous *Relación de algunas cosas de la Nueva España*, possibly written by a Cortés’ companion and first published in 1556. *Maize* is presented as “a grain like a chickpea” that sows cobs “like panic-grass”. *Tortillas* are described as a kind of bread – and so referred to the Mediterranean culinary tradition. *Chili* is referred to as “a kind of pepper”. The turkey is presented as a “big chicken like a peacock”. The reference to European culture is constant and [...] inevitable. But it is not just that. It is not just a terminological and theoretical problem, as, even from the practical point of view, the acceptance of these new realities in the European context remained for a long time absolutely marginal. (ibid., 122 [translation mine])

Poulain (2002) offers another interesting example of the processes underlying the inclusion and acceptance of new foods referring to the discovery of the Americas and, especially, to the introduction of the *potato* in the European context. Easily accepted in regions characterised by a soil unfitting the cultivation of wheat or rye (Poulain 1984), the American tuber was mostly refused or submitted to treatments aiming at integrating it into the process of bread making in France, where bread constituted the most valorised food of the 17th century, both on the material side (as it was the principal ingredient of soups and other dishes, prevailing on meats and cold cuts) and the symbolic dimension (with particular reference to Christianity).

Like other systems of the *semiosphere* (Lotman 1984), therefore, food is in constant transformation and *re-definition*, through *translation* processes that mediate between boosts and resistances to change. Such processes are gradual and, as Montanari (1997) and Poulain (1984; 2002) remark, sometimes very slow. Nevertheless they have suffered a sharp acceleration over time: in an increasingly globalised world, characterised by a number of migratory flows, the encounters—or sometimes, rather, conflicts—among different food cultures are becoming increasingly evident and consistent, affecting (much faster than in the past) the existing culinary “traditions” and becoming part of them.

On the one hand, contemporary food trends have been returning to organic principles such as “biological production” and “natural periodicity” (cf. Montanari 1997, 226-30; Montanari and Sabban 2004), encouraging people to prefer local organic products instead of foods imported or grown using “unnatural” techniques. On the other hand, the *exotic* and the *ethnic* have become a fundamental presence in Western food cultures. From the several *döner kebabs* that fill up the streets where we walk to the many *sushi* bars and the more and more present Eritrean, Senegalese, or Asiatic restaurants, the offer of ethnic food is extremely wide and varied. There are also several ethnic shops (such as *halal* butchers, Chinese bakeries, or Mexican stores), which are increasing, and many city markets⁸ where the local products are increasingly complemented with spices,

⁸ For the analysis of a very known ethnic market, *Porta Palazzo* in Turin (Italy), cf. Black 2007; Stano 2011.

vegetables and other foods required for the preparation of exotic dishes. This same phenomenon, moreover, is progressively become popular even in the large retail: in North America and Europe, for example, recent decades have seen the growth of foreign foods on supermarket shelves, sometimes in sections specifically devoted to ethnic food (e.g. soy noodles, Mexican tortillas, chili sauce, spring rolls, or sushi), and sometimes even next to local and more common products (e.g. basmati rice, coconut milk, or exotic fruits).

Therefore, it is very interesting to reflect on the dynamics of encounter and interpenetration that take place within such a variety of food “languages”. That is, following the analogy with language, to analyse the processes of “translation” related to the culinary code, and the effects arising from them on the level of signification.

In particular, Fischler (1990) introduces the idea of the *omnivore’s paradox*: on the one hand, human beings suffer from a biological need for food variety, which is an *omnivorousness* that implies autonomy, freedom, adaptability, driving us to adapt to environmental changes and exploring a multitude of new foods and diets (*neophilia*). On the other hand, humans generally fear the risks associated with new foods and new food sources (*neophobia*), thus opting for prudence and resistance to change.

Beyond the paradoxical opposition between these two poles, Fischler (1988; 1990) stresses the importance of the so-called *principle of incorporation*, which has different connotations. On the *psychological* side, “one becomes what one eats”: from the objective perspective, “the food we absorb provides not only the energy our body consumes but the very substance of the body, inasmuch as it helps to maintain the biochemical composition of the organism” (Fischler 1988, 279). At the same time, from a *subjective* point of view, people believe or fear, according to particular processes of the magical thinking, that food act either on the state of the organism or on their essence and identity by “analogical contamination, integration or impregnation” (*ibid.*), recalling the well-known Brillat-Savarin’s aphorism “Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are” (1825). Moreover, on the *psychosociological* side, incorporation represents the basis of collective identity and, at the same time, of Otherness: by the same act of eating, we incorporate ourselves, thus feeling integrated into a sociocultural dimension.

Thus, not only does the eater incorporate the properties of food, but, symmetrically, it can be said that the absorption of a food incorporates the eater into a culinary system and therefore into the group which practices it, unless it irremediably excludes him. But this is not all: any culinary system is attached to, or part of, a world view, a cosmology (Douglas, 1966). Man eats, so to speak, within a culture, and this culture orders the world in a way that is specific to itself. (Fischler 1988, 280-81)

Food, cooking, and table manners, being culturally determined, insert human beings in a particular social and cultural background, inciting processes of identification and distinction.

It is also very interesting to compare Fischler's approach with the works by Rozin (1976), Beardsworth (1990; 1995), and, above all, Bachelard (1948), who, building on psychoanalysis, distinguishes between two structures of the oral unconscious: *swallowing* and *mastication*. As Jean-Pierre Poulain recapitulates in his book *Sociologies de l'alimentation* (2002), the act of swallowing recalls that of *sucking*, which is the primitive stage of the oral phase, when the infant sucks the breast milk, so feeling related to other people, who represent his or her source of food, by the same act of swallowing (cf. Housser 1976). Swallowing does not imply the disintegration of food, but rather its valorisation and consecration (Durand 1960), thus not altering its symbolic identity. On the other hand, with mastication the desire for incorporation becomes sadistic, as the object incorporated is mutilated, damaged, and fragmented, and the symbolic meanings are decomposed and recomposed. After examining the symbolic implications of this classification, Poulain (2002, 160-63) comes to define four phases for the social incorporation of food (cf. Table 1).

Main scheme of incorporation	Consumer	Food	Meanings of incorporation
Contamination (swallowing)	Receptive	Positive	Eating in order to be contaminated by the qualities of the object. Consumers allow food to “invade” themselves by its positive characteristics.
	Receptive	Negative	Refusing food in order to avoid “invasion” (taboos, temporary or permanent avoidances, fasting, etc.).
Appropriation (mastication)	Unreceptive	Positive	Eating in order to acquire the constitutive qualities of the object and to strengthen the consumer.
	Unreceptive	Negative	Eating in order to destroy the consumed object.

Table 1 – The four phases of incorporation of food (Poulain 2002, 161 [translation mine]).

In the *positive contamination*, the incorporated object prevails on consumers, as the positive qualities of food “invade” and contaminate them. This attitude corresponds to the endocannibalism, which involves members of a community consuming the flesh of another member of the same group, usually in veneration of the dead, and to the Eucharist, where the host should not be masticated as it represents the body of Christ. In the *negative contamination*, eaters focus more on the risks and dangers associated with food, as its characteristics could potentially damage human integrity or identity. This incompatibility between consumer and consumed object results in taboos, fasting, and avoidances. On the contrary, the *positive appropriation* implies an active eater, who eats food in order to take possession of its qualities, as in esocannibalism, where victims are consumed to acquire their strength. Finally, in the *negative appropriation* the eater ingests negatively valorised foods in order to sublimate their negativity, as in certain mystic practices (cf. Albert 1997) or in the so-called judicial cannibalism, where the execution of convicts and the consumption of their body represent a way to restore order.

Another interesting classification is Jean-Pierre Corbeau’s typology (1991) based on Raymond Ledrut’s categorisation of food consumers (1979). According to the latter,

eaters “obsessed by overconsumption” (*complexés du trop*) distinguish themselves by their anxiety in ingesting food, as they consider eating as an activity strictly related to risks such as food diseases (e.g. bulimia or anorexia), social appearance (where thinness plays a key role), health issues (which stress the importance of choosing beneficial foods), or religious beliefs and ideologies (generally associated with particular practices and avoidances). The main characteristic of the “supporters of light nourishment” (*fervents du nourissant léger*) is that they focus mainly on maintaining a balance between eating for pleasure and eating healthy. They also have special penchant for exotic food, both synchronically (for other cuisines) and diachronically (with respect to traditional local dishes and products). Finally, the “promoters of substantial nourishment” (*adeptes du nourissant consistant*) love cold cuts, meats, and coarse-grained products, favouring the energetic dimension. Corbeau further enhances this classification introducing the category of the “gastrolastress”, whose name comes from the crasis of the words *gastrolâtre*, used by Rabelais to refer to consumers who deify their stomach, and the idea of *stress*, which recalls to modern life constraints and rhythms.

Despite representing ideal typologies that should not be confused with reality, these distinctions constitute very interesting attempts to define schemes for analysing people’s approach to food, as well as to elaborate further on enhanced patterns for observing contemporary food cultures and the translation processes related to them. If globalisation breaks down some cultural differences, it also activates a process of diversification and integration that redefines the uses and meanings of products and techniques. Therefore, as mentioned above, it becomes essential to reflect on these crossbreeding processes, as well as to try to decipher the implications of such “translations”. With this respect, it is important to recall the anthropological research developed by scholars like Bradby (1997), Harbottle (2004), and Caplan, Keane, Willets and Williams (1998), or food sociologists such as Cohen (1993; 2000) or Tibère (1997; Poulain and Tibère 2000), who generally use the concept of *ethnicity* to analyse the effects of food globalisation and the experience of the exotic. These analyses are really interesting, especially when they aim at understanding how different communities create a common culinary space balancing

new foods and techniques with local practice, ingredients, and dishes. By contrast, they generally refer to very confined and small societies, thus not reflecting the more global hybridisation processes affecting contemporary food societies and cultures.

As Fabio Parasecoli (2011) reminds us, in the interaction among different culinary spheres, “food-related experiences reveal the cultural character of gastronomic competences, forcing individuals to engage with otherness through embodied communication” (645). Focusing on signification and communication processes, semiotics can therefore offer effective analytical tools to analyse food hybridisations and intersections:

Ingredients, dishes, and practices can be interpreted as carrying meaning and used to infer information about their makers, their cultures, and their environments. At the same time, they can be produced to carry meaning, becoming effective tools of intentional communication. While semiotics can help us achieve a better understanding of behaviors related to culinary encounters, at the same time the examination of these phenomena can shed new light on food as a network of interrelated embodied processes of semiosis. (*ibid.*, 647)

Recalling Eco’s concept of *encyclopaedia* (1975; 1979; 1984) and Lotman’s *semiosphere* (1984, 1990), Parasecoli analyses the encounter with new foods from the point of view of both travellers and migrants, stressing the importance of considering not only the flavour, the visual aspect, or the temperature of foods, but also and above all their interactions with other discourses, practices, and cultural texts (2011, 648-55).

Rather than focusing on small-scale and very confined societies, therefore, it is essential to broaden the discourse on food hybridisations and intersections to the contemporary world, which is strongly characterised by a number of migratory flows, displacements, and travels, as well as by increasing and fast-changing interactions between foods and other *inter-cultural* texts. This means to focus not only on *food-material* (the ingredients used, their importation from the “original” context or

substitution with variously declined “substitutes”, the inclusion of new species in agriculture or livestock, and the insertion of previously unknown or not so common products in the usual production and distribution chains), but also and rather on *texts* (the recipes, analysing the similarities but also the differences between them and the “original” versions they make reference to, never losing sight neither of the reference to the culinary tradition the recipes refer to nor of the context in which they are transposed), *discourses* (arts, mass media, literature, and other domains underlying the collective *imaginarium*⁹), and *practices* of preparation but especially consumption of different dishes (making their symbolism explicit and focusing especially on some aspects such as the spatial dimension, temporality,¹⁰ the use of certain tools, etc.).

In such a perspective, it becomes essential to adopt a semiotic approach able to concentrate particularly on the constraints and the effects of the translation processes involving food and eating, with an analysis based on the deep observation of the *contextual differences*, that is, the “aesthetic and social *norms* and the ideologies that may separate the [...] texts in translation” (Volli 2000, 185 [translation mine]).

1.6 Food and Communication

In addition to the analysis of food as a language and a system of communication, it is very interesting to consider the languages and forms of communication related to food universe: from cinema to various forms of arts, from wine and food tasting to cooking blogs, from photography to fashion or design, food is at the centre of numerous discourses that communicate and analyse it, at the same time investing it with multiple

⁹ The term *imaginarium* is used to refer to the socially shared depository of images—or, more generally, of *figures*—which comprises part of a cultural *encyclopaedia* (cf. Eco 1975; 1979; 1984) directing and regulating its imaginative paths according to the dual dimension of an “internal *imaginarium*” (intended as a “cultural pattern for the production of images and figures,” Volli 2011: 35 [translation mine]) and an “external *imaginarium*” (conceived as a “material system of production and storage of [these] images,” Volli 2011, 35 [translation mine]). Several works have investigated the term and its meanings, which are not easy to define; in particular, cf. Leone 2011b, *passim*).

¹⁰ Cooking times and resulting effects, or specific valorisations arising from particular syntagmatic configurations.

values, and inserting it in multiform narrative programs. What are the traces left by such discourses? And how do these traces affect our perception of reality? Finally, what are mass media capabilities with respect to the representation of food and taste, and especially of their cultural dimension?

Many scholars have tried to answer these and other questions, analysing different texts, from media discourses to literary or artistic works.

In particular, Jean-Marie Floch (1995) examines the logo and the semantic universe underlying the cuisine of the well-known *chef* Michel Bras, whereas Jacques Fontanille (2005) stresses the importance of the visual organisation of his dishes, sometimes to be intended as instructions for consuming the different courses, sometimes rather as a sort of ironic revisitations of them.

Ave Appiano's *Bello da mangiare* (2000) concentrates rather on the visual representation of food in arts, along with Paolo Fabbri's research on the futuristic aesthetics concerning food (2013), as well as other works like the analyses by Stefania Caliandro (2006) or Lucia Corrain (2013), which focus on the representation of the spaces for the sell and purchase of food.

On the other hand, Denis Bertrand's *Un gâteau indo-européen* (2000, 142-43), Gianfranco Marrone's *La forma dell'arancino* (2005c), and Paolo Fabbri's *Texture: substance and form* (2003), investigate the recipes described in some literary texts—respectively Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), Johann of Bockenheim's *Registrum Coquine* (1431-1435), and Andrea Camilleri's *Gli arancini di Montalbano* (1999)—, aiming at the description of the social, cultural, and ideological structures they convey. There are also many collections of literary extracts concerning food, cuisine, and eating, like Wenying Xu's *Eating Identities* (2008) or Tomoko Ayoama's *Reading Food in Modern Japanese Literature* (2008).

Finally, other works, such as Boutaud's *L'imaginaire de la table* (2004), Boutaud and Madelon's *La médiatisation du culinaire* (2010), or Pozzato's *Il cibo nelle riviste per un pubblico maschile* (2006), focus on mass media representations of food and their effects, while other authors have considered these same topics in other domains such as cinema (Bianciardi 2011), advertising (Stano 2012; 2014) or design (Stummerer and

Hablesreiter 2005, Mangano 2013).

1.7 Food between Subjectivity and Inter-Subjectivity: Taste, Commensality, and Roles¹¹

Speaking about food and eating implies considering another really significant topic: *taste*. Also known as gustatory perception, taste is interesting as it goes beyond the individual sensation, embracing the *inter*-subjective and collective level: “taste is activated [...] in a subjective but also, immediately, inter-subjective dimension, as it seeks legitimacy through comparison and sharing” (Perullo 2008, 67 [translation mine]). If on the one hand the taste dimension depends on biological and physiological—and so individual—components, on the other hand, it seems to be socially and culturally determined, as it is based on inter-subjectively defined patterns of valorisation.

Constantly hovering between *neophobia* (prudence, fear of the unknown, resistance to innovation, Fischler 1990) and *neophilia* (exploration, need for change, novelty, variety, *ibid.*), taste represents a *cultural construct*: in addition to the physiological dimension, as Jean-Jacques Boutaud (2005) states, “the taste performance and the selection of more pleasant or energetic foods are often linked to social performance” (96 [translation mine]). It is essential, therefore, to analyse not only the semiotic traits of the gustatory dimension and its links with the other senses,¹² but also and most importantly the interactions of society, culture, and perception. In particular, it is necessary to reflect on the importance of the spatial and temporal syntax for the tasting experience, conceiving the moment of *gustatory sanction* as the encounter between physical

¹¹ This paragraph is a re-elaborated version of part of a lecture I presented on the occasion of the XL AISS (“Associazione Italiana di Studi Semiotici”) Congress, Turin, September 2012. Cf. Stano 2013b.

¹² Cf. classical texts such as Aristotle’s *On the Soul* (IV sec. B.C., 2nd book: 5-6) or Plato’s *Phaedo* (IV sec. B.C.), *Theaetetus* (386-367 B.C.), and *Sophist* (IV sec. B.C.), but especially most modern analyses like Merleau-Ponty’s *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945) or Dufrenne’s *L’œil et l’oreille* (1987).

sensations and sociocultural constructions.¹³

In addition to the gustatory experience, it is essential to consider the concept of *commensality*, which, beyond the material and physical dimension of food experience, refers to the symbolic space that characterises it, as well as to the *roles* and *forms* related to eating.

Eating together assumes [...] a ritual and symbolic meaning that is by far greater than the simple satisfaction of the need for nourishment: what we call *commensality* is a form of sharing and interchanging, and of identification. (*ibid.*, 23)

With this respect, it is interesting to consider Erving Goffman's definition of *role* (1961):

The activity the incumbent would engage in were he to act solely in terms of the normative demands upon someone in his position. Role in this normative sense is to be distinguished from *role performance* or role enactment, which is the actual conduct of a particular individual while on duty in his position (85).

Being the “basic unit of socialization” (*ibid.*, 87), role is critical for any form of interaction, as the image of the *self* arises in its enactment: as there is a very strict connection between *being* and *doing*, individuals are requested to relate the impressions of themselves arising in the situation to the personal qualities corresponding to the role they are performing (cf. *ibid.*, 86). Thus a judge should be deliberate and sober, a bookkeeper accurate and neat in doing his/her work, and a commensal hungry, prepared to “taste”, and convivial.

But which *commitments*, which *expectations*, which *obligations*—to continue using Goffman's terminology—characterise the eater? To what extent is subjectivity subjected to processes of deconstruction that redefine it according to the roles required by

¹³ Cf. Floch (1995b), Marrone (1997), Marsciani (1997), Fontanille (1999), and Ricci and Ceccarelli (2000).

commensality and tasting? By contrast, to what extent can subjectivity emerge, deconstructing those same roles, without undermining the possibility of existence of the eating experience?

First, referring to the *differentiation of roles* (*ibid.*, 91) it is necessary to distinguish between those who prepare the eating experience (the restaurant owners and the *chefs*) and those who “consume” it, which are at the same time both *observing subjects* and *observed objects* (by both the restaurateurs and other commensals). This observation evokes to the so-called *problem of expression*:

When an individual makes an appearance in a given position, he will be the person that the position allows and obliges him to be and will continue to be this person during role enactment. The performer will attempt to make the expressions that occur consistent with the identity imputed to him; he will feel compelled to control and police (*ibid.*, 99).

While tasting common flavours or rather discovering new foods or tastes, *performers* try to control their expressive activity in order to express a certain identity, related to the specific role they enact in that moment. Thus, in experiencing new and unusual food, even if they do not appreciate the new tastes, they will try not to express their disgust, disguising it on the level of verbal expression, as well as on the *paraverbal* dimension (e.g. volume and tone of voice) and the *nonverbal* level (e.g. proxemics, gestures, and facial expressions). Even the control of the so-called *techniques of the body* (Mauss 1934), which are highly developed body practices that embody aspects of a given culture or group and can be adapted to different situations, would play a key role in this process.

By contrast, Goffman highlights that there are some exceptions: roles may not only be *played* but also *played at*, or even *broke up* (cf. 1961, 99-100). In the second case, performers will pretend to “live” the eating experience by assimilating it only superficially, as their paraverbal communication (facial mimicry, uncontrolled expressions of disgust, missing acts, or Freudian slips) will reveal. They would thus succumb to errors regarding practices and behaviours, opening the way for the so-called

civil disattention (Goffman 1963): the other diners and the restaurateurs will give them enough visual notice to demonstrate that they have seen them, “while at the next moment withdrawing [their] attention from [them] so as to express that [they do] not constitute a target for special curiosity or design” (84). Despite being noticed, therefore, the uncontrolled acts and errors will be moved to the background in order to maintain the *frame* of the eating experience and its conditions of existence. Finally, in the third case, the same individuals will *break role*, by wilfully manipulating the eating act in order to drive even the restaurateurs and the other commensals to modify its forms and meanings.

Building on these observations, the eating experience seems to recall the sphere of *game*, as, just like the latter, its success and pleasure result from the ambiguity of this particular balance between social roles and subjectivity, as well as from the fact that it implies the exhibition of external attributes (cf. Goffman 1961, 67) by those who participate in it, that is, the display of their personal qualities. It is therefore possible to interpret eating as a sort of test for the *subject* (cf. Greimas 1970; 1983) who, with a view to a positive *sanction*, establishes a *contract* with the *Sender-Manipulator*, whose figurativisation finds expression in the restaurateurs (tutors and guarantors of the eating experience) and the other diners (at the same time *Senders-Manipulators* and *Receivers-Subjects* with respect to the considered subject). Being this game open and flexible, moreover, it opens the way to a series of important possibilities, such as jokes, cheating attempts, or corruption or influence strategies.

In any case, according to Goffman (1974), the personal style of the individual arises precisely in the *role distance* (105): if the *interaction* permits the expression of the *self* by providing the symbolic material through which the self projected by an individual is confirmed or discredited, eating represents one of the central space for the expression of identity, where subjectivity is challenged by the interference of different beliefs and cultures, as well as by the tension between taste sensuality and moderation (cf. Boutaud 2005). On the contrary, this space is *multimodal*, as it implies different forms of interactions (e.g. the verbal language, the non-verbal dimension, or the temporal and spatial organisation). Moreover, despite involving given roles and rules, these processes include the possibility for even the simplest gesture to assume a peculiar social value,

becoming part of a ritual dimension. Subjectivity, then, is always present, although hidden under the roles supposed by the eating act and the *interpellation* processes that inscribe the subject in a certain universe of competences, desires, functions, and passions. Far from eliminating the self, therefore, this space permits to perceive it in the unexpected situations in which the roles are broken and subjectivity can emerge.

1.8 Concluding Remarks: Which Semiotics of Food?

As noted above, analysing food implies considering different elements: the development of systems of classification in terms of edible *vs.* non-edible substances; the logics underlying such categorisations and the social and cultural changes affecting them over time; the gustatory perception and its links with both the physiological dimension and the inter-subjective level; the concept of commensality and the delicate equilibrium between social roles and subjectivity; the interpretation of food as a language and the analysis of the translation processes among different food cultures; the numerous languages and forms of communication related to food universe. There are also many other aspects that cannot be considered here, but are very significant too, such as table manners, food design, drinks and beverages, the increasing presence of the so-called “junk food”, the opposition between fast food and slow food, or the eno-gastronomic tourism.¹⁴

Being mainly neglected by semioticians for years, these topics have been at the centre of the analyses of different anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists, historians, linguists, and psychologists. However, as highlighted above, being that food is a sign and a system of communication, it has also progressively caught the attention of semiotics. Different scholars, such as Barthes (1961), Greimas (1983), and Lévi-Strauss¹⁵ (1964; 1966; 1968; 1971) before, and Floch (1995b), Boutaud (2004; 2005), Marrone (1997; 2001; 2005c), or Fontanille (1999; 2005) after, have studied food and

¹⁴ Cf. Marrone and Giannitrapani 2013; Stano 2013a.

¹⁵ Whose hybrid figure could be placed at the intersection between anthropology and semiotics.

taste in order to decipher not only their grammar, as in the case of structuralists, but also to analyse the different texts, discourses, and practices related to them.

Food constitutes a very stimulating field of research for different approaches in semiotics, including not only the more traditional text semiotics, but also sociosemiotics, semiotics of culture, and the so-called biosemiotics (cf. Parasecoli 2011).

In effect, the analysis of food-related behaviours recalls various relevant issues in sociosemiotics, such as the tensions underlying the creation of meaning in social practices and the development of patterns of signification across time, space, and different social and cultural circumstances (cf. Landowski 1989; Marrone 2001; Cobley and Randviir 2009).

From the point of view of semiotics of culture, as developed by Lotman (1984; 1990) and the Tartu-Moscow school, culinary traditions and practices form part of the semiosphere, the realm within which semiosis (and so the production, the exchange, and the reception of all information and communication, cf. Volli 2000, 215) exists. In cultural settings, in fact, different types of food, culinary techniques, eating events, and rituals are “signs and texts that are part of a culture’s overarching network of meanings” (Danesi 2006, 533). It is therefore very interesting to analyse contemporary societies, where food globalisation, migrations, and travels have brought numerous encounters, intersections, and conflicts among different food cultures. Lotman (1984) describes the semiosphere as composed by peripheral spaces, where new elements can be accepted in the signifying dynamics, and core areas, where the dominant semiotic systems are located ([ET 2005], 214). The relationship between the core and the periphery of the semiosphere is continuously negotiated, with peripheral elements moving toward the center and interacting with the main semiotic systems according to rules changing over time. Food, as all levels of the semiosphere, comprises itself “an inter-connected group of semiospheres, each of them being simultaneously both participant in the dialogue (as part of the semiosphere) and the space of dialogue (the semiosphere as a whole)” (*ibid.*, 225). Therefore, in the realm of food cultural meanings supersede the simple dichotomies generally implied to describe and discuss its characteristics (cf. Parasecoli 2011, 653; Caldwell 2004; Wilk 2006): global vs. local, authentic vs. invented, artisanal

vs. industrial, and so forth.

Finally, as Parasecoli states,

Since studying culinary systems means dealing with eating and ingesting – a dimension closely connected with the survival of the human body – and food is mostly composed of plants and animals, the field is also open to reflection for the approach known as *biosemiotics*. (2011, 647 [italics mine])

Drawing upon Kull's observations (1998a, 1998b, 2001) on the link between sign systems and living systems and his definition of the semiosphere as the space of diversity (2005, 185) where qualitative differences can emerge, fuse, and sustain, as well as on Sebeok's statement (2001, 69) that food represents a realm of nature characterised by the interaction among the physiological dimension of nutrition, the cultural aspects of signification and communication, and the social structures of production, distribution, and consumption, the scholar concludes that

The analysis of food through the lens of contemporary semiotics, in particular within the debate on the semiosphere and biosemiotics, can help focus on bodies not as closed entities but as processes and practices, highlighting their relational aspects (with humans, other living being, and the whole environment), and their role in semiosis. [...] A semiotic analysis of food can help us achieve a more nuanced and holistic interpretation of semiosis as a process that involves not only the mind but also the whole embodied experience, well beyond sensory perceptions. (Parasecoli 2011, 661)

Moreover, as Ugo Volli (2000, 282-284) reminds us, beyond materiality, the body is a particular and ambivalent type of text that marks at the same time the origin and the limit of the processes of signification, mediating between subjectivity and cultural identities. It could be really significant, therefore, to analyse the way it participates in food-related

experiences, paying particular attention to the encounter of different food semiospheres and to the delicate equilibrium between social roles and the expression of the self. More attention should then be paid to *corporeality*, building on concepts such as the “techniques of the body” (cf. Mauss 1934), the principle of incorporation (from Fischler’s analysis (1988; 1990) to new developments¹⁶), the sensory dimension and its interactions with the sociocultural sphere, and the crossing of the barriers between the inside and the outside of the body, in order to decipher both food providers and consumers’ *practices* and the forms of textuality that such practices deposit in their recurring.

It is also essential to reflect on the *spatial* dimension, considering various aspects: the opposition between global and local, the new concepts of *glocality* (cf. in particular Sedda 2012) and *translocality* (Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1992; Ong 1999; Low 2009), the configuration of the space where food is eaten, as well as the organisation of the space of the table and that inside the plate, and the presence of oppositions like inside *vs.* outside or internal *vs.* external. Moreover, interesting new outcomes could derive from the concept of *embodied space* (Low 2009), intended as the location where human experience and consciousness take on material and spatial form. This approach stresses the importance of the body as a physical and a biological entity, but also as lived experience and a centre of agency, thus addressing particularly to issues such as proxemics (Hall 1968), phenomenological understandings (Richardson 1984), spatial orientation (Munn 1996), and incorporation (Fischler 1988; 1990).

Even if some first attempts have successfully shown the importance of applying semiotics to food-related issues, there is still much to do. It is necessary, first of all, to pay special attention to issues until now mostly neglected but increasingly evident and significant in contemporary societies, such as food globalisation and the translation processes among different food semiospheres, but also to enhance the research on more addressed topics, like gustatory perception or the links among food, language and communication, by complementing the more traditional approaches, such as structuralism and text semiotics, to the new branches focusing on the observation of

¹⁶ Cf. §1.5.

practices, social dynamics, and other tools of analysis. Moreover, focusing on hybridisation and translation processes highlights the need for a structured historical reconstruction and an in-depth diachronic analysis, as “to treat food as a signifying system symbiotic with social, cultural, economic, and religious ideologies requires us to study food practices as both produced by and productive of historical and cultural context” (Xu 2008, 163). Definitely, it would be profitable to maintain and improve the dialogue with other disciplines like anthropology, sociology, history, geography, and other branches of the so-called food studies, whose interactions in the analysis of meanings and structures underlying food-related habits and facts could lead to very interesting outcomes, as most of the above mentioned examples illustrate.

SECTION 2
METHODOLOGY AND AIMS

CHAPTER 2 –METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

Abstract

Chapter 2 clarifies the main aim of the research: observing contemporary foodspheres with respect to the “translation” processes among different culinary systems, which have become increasingly evident and relevant within Western food cultures. It becomes therefore essential to consider the dynamics of encounter and interpenetration taking place within such a variety of food “languages”, which means to analyse the processes of “interlingual translation” related to the culinary code, and the effects arising from them on the level of signification. A crucial prerequisite of such a research is to clearly define some parameters for the analysis and its object, as well as to briefly describe the methodologies underlying it, in order not to get lost in the variety and variability of such a complex phenomenon and such a composite set of methodological approaches. The chapter therefore takes into consideration the main issues related to semiotics of culture, sociosemiotics, and ethnosemiotics, trying to combine the renowned European tradition with an international perspective. Special attention is paid to the inclusion of practices and the same definition of text: from the structuralist conception of text as an immutable, coherent, and orderly system, semiotics has progressively moved to the idea of “textuality”, considered as the form and content of a reality that is intelligible through the semiotic eye, which periodically redefines its boundaries, opening new perspectives of analysis.

2.1 Delimiting the Area of Interest: Food and “Ethnicity”

As noted in Chapter 1, despite being almost completely disregarded by semioticians for years, food has progressively caught the attention of different scholars in this field. To such an extent that it represents a central thread in the semiotic texture, as, ranging from the first textualist approaches to the most modern analyses of practices and sociocultural phenomena, it embraces different methodologies and perspectives. We have already mentioned the structuralist attempts to decipher food grammar and structures (cf. Barthes 1961; Lévi-Strauss 1964; 1966; 1968; 1971), as well as the various textual analyses concerning recipes (Jakobson 1965; Greimas 1983, Bastide 1987, Fabbri 1991; Bertrand 2000; Marrone 2005c), and some of the new approaches exploring the gustatory perception (Landowski and Fiorin 1997; Boutaud 2004; 2005; Bianciardi 2011; Spinelli 2011) and the several discourses (Appiano 2000; Pozzato 2006; Ayoama 2008; Xu 2008; Boutaud and Madelon 2010; Marrone and Giannitrapani 2012; Corrain 2013; etc.) and practices related to the “foodsphere” (Fontanille 1999; 2006; Spinelli 2011). We also made reference to the need of considering different perspectives such as biosemiotics, semiotics of culture, and sociosemiotics, analysing the tensions underlying the production of meaning in social practices and the development of patterns of signification across time, space, and different social and cultural circumstances (cf. Landowski 1989; Marrone 2001; Copley and Randviir 2009).

On the other hand, as Gianfranco Marrone (cf. Marrone and Giannitrapani 2012, II) reports, although having become increasingly important, the semiotic research on food is still not adequately appreciated and debated. New topics should be addressed and new methodologies implemented, paying particular attention to the recent sociocultural phenomena that are profoundly affecting contemporary food cultures and systems.

Building on these premises, the present research aims precisely at observing contemporary *foodspheres* with respect to the *translation* processes among different culinary systems: as highlighted in Chapter 1, in fact, the *exotic* and the *ethnic* have become a fundamental presence in Western food cultures, both on the level of food markets and that of food service. It becomes therefore essential to consider the dynamics

of encounter and interpenetration that take place within such a variety of food “languages”, which means, in other words, to analyse the processes of *interlingual translation*¹ (Jakobson 1959) related to the culinary code, and the effects arising from them on the level of signification. A crucial prerequisite of such a research is to clearly define some parameters for the analysis and its object, as well as to briefly describe the methodologies underlying it, not to get lost in the variety and variability of such a complex phenomenon and such a composite set of methodological approaches. The following paragraphs will be devoted to these aspects.

2.2 For a Definition of “Ethnic Food”: Preliminary Remarks

It is necessary, first of all, to clarify what is meant by “ethnic food”. Without dwelling too much on the definitions of *ethnos* and *ethnicity* and their variations over time (cf. in particular Amselle 1985; 1990), it is sufficient in this context to consider the common use of the term, according to which the adjective *ethnic* is used to refer to what is “characteristic of another culture” (Collins 2013). Such denotation immediately recalls what the anthropologist and ethnologist Jean-Loup Amselle (1990) states about culture specification in his book *Logiques métisses*:² “The designation of one or another culture [...] results from an objectifying external viewpoint. This in turn creates the scale of ‘Others’ that history has categorized” ([ET 1998], 30). In other terms, the same definition of *ethnic* food implies an outside, external, and foreign look, which, while getting in contact with a certain culinary system, *re*-defines it according to its own cultural background (or *encyclopedia*, to recall Eco’s work (1975; 1979a; 1984)).

¹ Roman Jakobson (1959) distinguishes between three forms of interpretation that modify or rewrite a text in different ways: *intralingual*, *interlingual*, and *intersemiotic* translation. In the case of intralingual translation, the text is interpreted by reformulating its signs through other signs belonging to the same language, such as in *periphrasis*. In the case of interlingual translation—which is the case of *translation* as it is normally understood—the verbal sign is replaced with another sign belonging to a different language. Finally, intersemiotic translation implies a *transmutation*, as a semiotic system—such as the verbal system—is translated into another system of signs—such as the visual or audiovisual systems.

² English Translation *Metizco Logics*, 1998.

Such phenomenon constitutes an essential peculiarity of nowadays *foodspheres*: as Sidney W. Mintz and Christine M. Dubois (2002) report in *The Anthropology of Food and Eating*, “not only do peoples move across the globe, so also do foods” (105). Illustrating the triple effect of globalisation of markets—the disappearance of certain particularities, the emergence of new forms of food and eating resulting from a process of hybridisation, and the circulation on a transcultural scale of some products and eating practices—, Jean-Pierre Poulain (2002) further illustrates this issue, stating that these three mechanisms should be considered not as elements annihilating the existing food cultures, but rather as factors participating in their continuous *re*-construction (28). Guido Ferraro (1998) adopts a similar perspective, asserting that the main aim of the food system, as that of the fashion system, is to attenuate differences in order to make different elements translatable into each other. Such a goal—the Italian semiotician states—can be achieved by operating primarily a simplification, a *re*-interpretation of what is unknown on the basis of a known framework (*ibid.*, 21). This has important consequences on the same definition of *identity* and *otherness*:

Like all culturally defined material substances used in the creation and maintenance of social relationships, food serves both to solidify group membership and to set group apart. [...] Ethnicity is born of acknowledged difference and works through contrast. Hence an ethnic cuisine is associated with a geographically and/or historically defined eating community (e.g., Lockwood & Lockwood 2000a). But ethnicity, like nationhood, is also imagined (Murcott 1996)—and associated cuisines may be imagined, too. Once imagined, such cuisines provide added concreteness to the idea of national or ethnic identity. (Mintz and Dubois 2002, 109)

The globalisation of markets and the mingling of different populations (especially due to migratory flows and international tourism) enhance the exchange of products and food practices, taking part in an extensive process of hybridisation of food systems, which in turn creates both *diversity* (cf. Poulain 2002, 29) and new forms of encounter and

homologation by means of differentiation (cf. Ferraro 1998, 22) of codes and cultures. As Allison James (1994) states in *Cuisiner les livres. Identités globales ou locales dans les cultures alimentaires*,³

In embodying identities in a multiplex fashion, they offer ways of embracing Otherness, of confronting the global through localized, even personal, food styles and, conversely, a way of living a local, life with and through global imagery. Thus, the exotic fruit now routinely available on supermarket shelves may be used casually to enhance a traditional English fruit salad – a careless cosmopolitanism invoked through ignorance or choice. Alternatively, these fruits may be carefully selected and deliberately employed, to recreate authentic ‘local’ tastes at home, by the food gourmet, the new immigrant or the politically exiled. The globalization of food is not, therefore, just a matter of the movement of food stuffs between nations; nor is it simply the amalgamation or accommodation of cuisines. It is a complex interplay of meanings and intentions which individuals employ subjectively to make statements about who they are, and where and how their Selves are to be located in the world. ([ET 1996], 92)

Moreover, according to Amselle (2001), every society is crossbred even within itself: building on James Clifford’s concept of *traveling cultures* (1997) and the researches carried out by Ulf Hannerz (1992) and Édouard Glissant (1990) on the idea of *creolization*, the French anthropologist describes cross-breeding and globalisation not as a collision among previously “pure” and intact elements, but rather as the encounter among already hybridised and heterogeneous systems, which has important implications on the processes of identification and differentiation:

³ English Translation *Cooking the Books: Global or local identities in contemporary British food cultures*, 1996.

L'identité [est] le résultat d'une traduction, c'est-à-dire d'une conversion de signes revêtant essentiellement deux formes : la subsumption et la particularisation. [...] L'identité implique d'emblée une traduction et une conversion par ce qu'elle est un être pour les autres. C'est en opérant la transmutation de schèmes englobant, proche ou éloignés, qu'une culture parvient à faire entendre sa voix. L'expression d'une identité quelconque suppose donc la conversion de signes universels dans sa propre langue où, à l'inverse, de signifiés propres dans un signifiant planétaire afin d'y manifester sa singularité. La traduction et la conversion, loin d'apparaître comme le résultat de la confrontation de deux ensembles linguistiques ou religieux distincts, se caractérisent donc comme des données immédiates de l'expression culturelle. (Amselle 2001, 58-59)

(Identity [is] the result of a translation, that is, a conversion of signs which assume essentially two forms: subsumption and particularisation. [...] Identity implies first of all a translation and a conversion as it is a "being for the others". By the transmutation of nearer or farer embedding schemes, a culture manages to assert itself. Therefore, the expression of any identity presupposes the conversion of universal signs into its own language or, on the contrary, the translation of its own meanings into a universal signifier in order to express its own singularity. Hence, far from appearing as the result of the comparison of two distinct religious or linguistic systems, translation and conversion are characterised as immediate data of cultural expression [translation mine]).

Focusing on semiotics of "ethnic" food, therefore, necessarily implies dealing primarily with semiotics of culture, sociosemiotics, and ethnosemiotics, as the same character of "ethnic" recalls the processes of definition of the "self" and the "other": "Food operates as one of the key cultural signs that structure people's identities and their concepts of others" (Xu 2008, 2). For this reason, before proceeding to the description of the corpus of analysis, we will present in the following some methodological remarks

concerning these approaches and their evolution over time.

2.3 Methodological Remarks

2.3.1 Semiotics of Culture

Culture has a double, split soul: it is at the same time “one and multiple, coherent and contradictory, systemic and procedural, regular and irregular, predictable and unpredictable, hierarchical and unstable, [...] orderly and chaotic” (Sedda, 2012, 11). It is in this sense that Franciscu Sedda refers to it as a “singular-plural” entity, a possibility of relationship that should be analysed without any reduction, by adopting a point of view able to catch both of these souls. Consequently, even the “soul” of the semiotic approach aiming at analysing it should be double: a *semiotics of culture*, animated by the attempt to catch the abstract and theoretical complexity of the cultural dimension conceived as a whole, risks losing sight of its tangible manifestations; on the contrary, a *semiotics of cultures*, favouring the concrete and varied dimension of the cultural life, runs the risk of neglecting the glue that holds together—and organises—such heterogeneity. Therefore it becomes evident the need of combining these two perspectives in a look that the Italian semiotician—following in Lotman’s footsteps—defines “stereoscopic” (*ibid.*, 16), sometimes even “cross-eyed”, as it is able to catch both analogies and differences, identity and otherness, the global and the local level. Such a perspective allows the semiotic eye to individuate and decipher the dynamics underlying what Sedda defines the “fight surrounding culture and signification” (*ibid.* [translation mine]), a fight that is made of “translations” (realised, lost, deconstructed, etc.). Thinking of the cultural system, therefore, means imagining a dimension strewn with conflicts and clashes, a universe traversed by tensions opposing different cultural models (cf. Volli 2000, 215) and translation processes among them. Such universe has at the same time

both an abstract and a concrete nature, and a plural configuration that, however, “should not be regarded as a conglomeration of separate texts and languages, but rather as a single mechanism, in which each element is set at a different level [...], in a constant relationship of reciprocal action and in continuous dynamics” (*ibid.*, [translation mine]).

The idea of a substantial correspondence between the “cultural” domain and the “semiotic” dimension is not new: Lévi-Strauss (1947) proposes a first semiotic conception of the entire human culture, stating that it is composed of different systems of communication connected through a substantial functional analogy, although, depending on the occasion, it could be the case of a communication of economic goods, linguistic acts, or even human beings (cf. also Volli 2000, 215).

Also Clifford Geertz, in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), introduces a “semiotic concept” of the cultural universe:

As interworked systems of construable signs (what, ignoring provincial usages, I would call symbols), culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be casually attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described. (14)

Following in this same wake, Jurij Mikhailovich Lotman (1984) includes culture in the *semiosphere*, which is the semiotic *continuum* virtually containing every linguistic system:

All semiotic space may be regarded as a unified mechanism (if not organism). In this case, primacy does not lie in one or another sign, but in the “greater system”, namely the semiosphere. The semiosphere is that same semiotic space, outside of which semiosis itself cannot exist.

Just as, by sticking together individual steaks, we don't

obtain a calf, but by cutting up a calf, we may obtain steaks, — in summarizing separate semiotic acts, we don't obtain a semiotic universe. On the contrary, only the existence of such a universe — the semiosphere — makes the specific signatory act real. ([ET 2005], 208)

It is within the semiosphere that the production, the exchange, and the reception of all information take place; outside of this environment semiosis and communication cannot exist. The “semiotic space” is characterised by four fundamental attributes: *heterogeneity*, *asymmetry*, *boundedness*, and *binarity*.

1 *Heterogeneity* – The languages of the semiosphere run along a continuum that includes the extremes of total mutual translatability and complete mutual untranslatability (1990: 125; 1992b: I. 11-24; 1992a: 14-16).

2 *Asymmetry* – The structure of the semiosphere is asymmetrical at multiple levels, including asymmetry in terms of internal translations, centre versus periphery, and metalinguistic structures (1990: 124-7; 1992a: 25-30; 1992b: I. 16-19).

3 *Boundedness* – One of the primary mechanisms of semiotic individuation is the creation of boundaries, which define the essence of the semiotic process. Boundaries are abstractions, and are often described as series of bilingual filters or membranes that are by definition permeable and fluid, on the one hand, and as areas of accelerated semiotic processes, on the other (1990: 131-40; 1992b: I. 13-16).

4 *Binarity* – The beginning point for any culture is based on the binary distinction of internal versus external space. Lotman insists that binary oppositions in the semiosphere exist only as pluralities – that is, as mechanisms that are obligatorily included for multiplication of languages (1990: 124; 1992b: I. 13-17). (Andrews 2003, 33).

The internal organisation of the semiosphere is characterised by a division between a core and a periphery, while its limits are marked by permeable boundaries dividing it from the *non-* or *extra-*semiotic space surrounding it:

Just as in mathematics the border represents a multiplicity of points, belonging simultaneously to both the internal and external space, the semiotic border is represented by the sum of bilingual translatable “filters”, passing through which the text is translated into another language (or languages), situated outside the given semiosphere. “The isolated nature” of the semiosphere subsists in the fact that it cannot be contiguous to extra-semiotic texts or non-texts. In order that these may be realised, they must be translated into one of the languages of its internal space, in other words, the facts must be semiotized. (Lotman 1984 [ET 2005], 208-209)

The boundaries among cultures, therefore, represent *bilingual* mechanisms that *translate* external and not yet semiotized communications into their internal language(s), which is organised in different semiotic systems.

For Lotman, boundaries are the basic mechanism of semiotic differentiation. [...] Lotman defines all boundaries as bilingual and membranelike. The most external of semiosphere boundaries differentiates the cultural ‘we’ from all the ‘others’, regardless of the nature and the space of the ‘other’ (be it another semiosphere or extra-semiotic space). (Andrews 2003, 46)

Building on these premises, Lotman focuses his analyses on the “life of text” within the cultural systems in which they are immersed rather than on their internal structure (cf. Lorusso 2010a, 71-72). Overlooking such analyses—which

are extremely important and interesting, but cannot be considered here—, as well as the problem of the “overlapping of different cultures” (cf. Volli 2010, 33-34), it is sufficient for the purposes of the present discussion to highlight how, in Lotman’s view, culture is an organism made of multiple intellectual devices that, once in contact with the extra- or non-semiotic reality, produces signs, translating “unsemioticized” data into language. It is in this sense that, according to Ugo Volli (2000, 215), culture can be interpreted as the result of man’s relationship with the world.

Such a conception of semiotics of culture stresses the importance of language as a *primary modelling system*, as it is understood as the first instrument of thought and translation, while the other cultural productions are conceived as *secondary modelling systems*, whose organisation and functioning reproduce the structural scheme of languages. In addition to a pure ensemble of modelling languages, however, culture can be also conceived as a combination of different entities, such as behaviours, beliefs, and practices. The history of anthropological thought is characterised by very different conceptions of culture: sometimes it is interpreted in terms of models, categories of thought, or plans of action, and so described as an essentially cognitive system and as a set of norms, values, and abilities (cf. Volli 2000, 216). For example, Edward Burnett Tylor (1871), father of one of the earliest and clearest definitions of culture—which is still widely accepted and used by contemporary scholars—, describes it as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1). In other cases, however, culture is conceived as a whole involving also the realisations of these abilities: Franz Boas (1911), for instance, defines it as

The totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterize the behavior of individuals composing a social group collectively and individually in relations to their natural environment, to other groups, to members of the group itself and of each individual to

himself. It also includes the products of these activities and their role in the life of the groups. The mere enumerations of these various aspects of life, however, does not constitute culture. It is more, for its elements are not independent, they have a structure. (149)

According to the Italian semiotician Umberto Eco (1975), analysing culture from a semiotic perspective does not mean forcing material life into purely mental constructions, reducing it to communication and signification processes totally untied from everyday life, but rather investigating the semiotic principles underlying the functioning of cultural objects, behaviours, and values. In other terms, every aspect of a culture can be conceived as a semantic entity (*ibid.*, 42). For this reason, Lotman's works on culture (cf. in particular 1970; 1984 [ET 2005]; 1992 [ET 2009]; Lotman and Uspenskij 1973 [ET 1975]) represent an inescapable reference frame for the semiotic analysis of cultural systems. As Volli (2000) efficaciously remarks, the Russian scholar conceives culture "both as a combination of *semiotic systems* (of norms, of *grammars*) and as a vast set of *contents*, corresponding to all the *non-hereditary information* owned by a social group" (217 [translation mine]). In his view, texts represent the place where information is deposited, elaborated, and translated, thus organising differences and meanings in communicable forms. Definitely, culture is both a depository and a text-generating mechanism:

The semiosphere is defined by Lotman as 'the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages, not the sum total of different languages; in a sense the semiosphere has a prior existence and is in constant interaction with languages ... a generator of information' (1990: 123, 127). This space is both a precursor to and a result of ('the result and the condition for') cultural development (1990: 125). (Andrews 2003, 42-43)

Finally, as previously mentioned, it should be remembered that, in addition to the external boundaries dividing the extra-semiotic from the semioticized information, every cultural system is characterised by a series of internal tensions. Lotman (1970) describes culture as “a historically evolved bundle (pucok) of semiotic systems (*languages*) which can be composed into a single hierarchy (*supralanguage*) which can also be a symbiosis of independent systems” (8 [ET in Winner and Winner 1976, 103] [Italics mine]). Every cultural sphere is composed of a *centre*, where the institutionalised and consolidated knowledge of a culture is located, and a *periphery*, where the more scarcely shared knowledge is situated. Nevertheless, there is no established or stable hierarchy as there are asymmetrical dynamics moving elements from the centre to the periphery and vice versa, thus creating plurality and differentiation. These observations lead us to consider the need of integrating a textual approach with the point of view of a semiotics of culture—and a semiotics of “cultures”, as Sedda would effectively remark—able to clarify how texts are produced, re-produced, interpreted, and translated among different cultures.

2.3.2 Sociosemiotics

From the structuralist conception of text as an immutable, coherent, and orderly system, semiotics has progressively moved to the idea of *textuality*, considered as the form and content of a “reality” that is intelligible through the semiotic eye, which periodically redefines its boundaries (cf. Volli 2000, 224). If the 1970s saw the transition from the analysis of isolated signs to the consideration of texts intended as signifying totalities (“tout de signification”, Greimas (1966, 29; 1970, 187)), the focus then moved to the need of considering not only verbal languages but also texts of different nature and, at the same time, of taking into account the competences required for the interpretation and analysis of the same text. Hence the importance of the *co-textual* and *contextual* data emerged (cf. Fabbri 1973;

Pozzato 1992), leading semiotics to the introduction of a new concept: *discourse*, that is, the semiotic area in which the enunciative effects of a text have actually effect, when it is indeed enunciated. With the “turning point of semiotics” (cf. Fabbri 1998) texts were placed in a wider framework correlating them to the discursive rules on which they depend—and, at the same time, which they contribute to renovate. The division between text and context has thus become increasingly confused, as the same context has come to represent an interpretable text:

Il discorso, qual è pensato dalla semiotica, non fa alcuna particolare differenza tra lingua e azione, tra il discorso in senso tradizionale e la prassi significativa che si estrinseca nei comportamenti personali o nelle situazioni sociali. (Fabbri and Marrone 2001, 83)

(The discourse, as it is conceived by semiotics, makes no difference between language and action, between the discourse intended in a traditional sense and the signifying practice that is expressed in personal behaviours or in social circumstances [translation mine]).

In addition to the elimination of the question of “non pertinence” of contexts (since the same discourse reconstructs the context within which it is inscribed as a specific situation of interlocution, cf. Landowski 1997, 190), as well as to the disciplinary enlargement and specialisation of such a “semiotics of discourse”, and the problems arising from its generalisations,⁴ this perspective efficaciously remarks the need of considering individual texts as “a part of a *textuality* representing the *general system of the formation and transformation of utterances and discourses*” (Volli 2000, 224 [translation mine]). In this way the same social acts that transform intersubjective relationships become the object of analysis,

⁴ Such issues are extremely interesting but cannot be discussed further here.

leading semiotics to focus on *practices*, intended as “*ways of doing things that arrange and rearrange the meanings that are deposited in texts, enhancing specific readings*” (*ibid.*, 225 [translation mine]).

En partant de la définition du sens comme intentionnalité orientée, et en tenant compte de ce que les organisations sémiotiques se constituent à l'intérieur de ces deux macrosémiotiques que sont les langues naturelles et les mondes naturels, on appellera *pratiques sémiotiques* les procès sémiotiques reconnaissables à l'intérieur du monde naturel, et définissables de manière comparable aux discours (qui sont des « pratiques verbale », c'est-à-dire des procès sémiotiques situés à l'intérieur des langues naturelles).

Les pratiques sémiotiques (que l'on peut qualifier également de sociales) se présentent comme des suites signifiantes de comportements somatique organisés, dont les réalisations vont des simples stéréotypes sociaux jusqu'à des programmations de forme algorithmique [...]. Les modes d'organisation de ces comportements peuvent être analysés comme des programmes (narratifs) dont la finalité n'est reconnaissable, à la limite, qu'a posteriori : par la suite, on utilisera, dans la mesure où elles s'y prêtent, les méthodes et procédures de l'analyse discursive. [...] Le concept de pratique sémiotique recouvre, entre autres, les discours gestuels et les stratégies proxémiques, encore trop peu explorés. (Greimas and Courtés 1979, 289)

(Building on the definition of meaning as oriented intentionality, and considering that semiotic organisations originate from the two macrosemiotics of natural languages and natural worlds, we call *semiotic practices* the semiotic processes that are recognisable within the natural world, and somehow definable as discourses

(which are “verbal practices”, that is, semiotic processes located within natural languages).

Semiotic practices (which can also be called social practices) represent signifying results of organised somatic behaviours, whose accomplishments range from simple social stereotypes to algorithmic programs. [...] The modes of organisation of such behaviours can be analysed as (narrative) programs whose purpose is recognisable, if anything, *a posteriori*: thereafter we could use, insofar as they can be applied, the methods and procedures of the discursive analysis. [...] The concept of semiotic practice includes, among others, gestural discourses and proxemic strategies, which are still not adequately investigated [translation mine]).

Since every practice is the result of an *act* instituting a *relational contract*, as well as a *present* relative to a specific moment and place—which, nonetheless, conserves the traces of enunciation—(cf. Volli 2000, 225), it represents itself a text that can be interpreted by an observer and deconstructed at a discursive level, or also in narrative programs, according to particular value systems.

In questo modo, le pratiche quotidiane divengono delle vere e proprie strutture testuali, il cui codice dipende però dalle operazioni discorsive relative al tipo di contesto in cui esse si iscrivono. [...] L'atto sensibile incontra le determinazioni della cultura in cui ha luogo, e allo stesso tempo agisce al suo interno deformandone i significati prestabiliti attraverso nuove connotazioni o griglie di lettura, istituendo cioè nuove forme di vita, che sono un modo per dare un altro senso al mondo. Le pratiche quotidiane e i comportamenti che le articolano sono così interpretabili come configurazioni discorsive che traducono valori e riscrivono norme culturali. (*ibid.*, 222-226)

(In this way, daily practices become real textual structures, whose code, however, depends on the discursive operations related to the type of context in which they are inscribed. [...] The meaningful act encounters the determinations of the culture in which it takes place, and, at the same time, it acts within it by deforming pre-established meanings through new connotations of reading grids, thus instituting new forms of life, which are a way of giving another meaning to the world. The daily practices and behaviours that articulate them become therefore reinterpretable as discursive configurations that translate values and rewrite cultural norms [translation mine]).

It becomes therefore evident the need for the semiotic approach to elaborate specific analytical models to analyse such textualities and the processes of valorisation and (re-)appropriation—or (re-)writing—of social meanings. Such a need has given rise to a particular branch of semiotics, known as *sociosemiotics*:

L'universalité de la culture et les spécificités culturelles constituent une des visées de la théorie sémiotique qui cherche à les atteindre et à les analyser systématiquement à travers la diversité des sémiotiques saisissables comme des axiologies ou comme des idéologies, et définissables comme des modèles d'action et de manipulation. A la sociosémiotique — dans la mesure où une telle distinction terminologique puisse avoir quelque utilité — serait réservé le vaste domaine des connotations sociales. (Greimas and Courtés 1979, 356)

(The universality of culture and cultural peculiarities represent one of the aims of semiotic theory, which seeks to achieve them and to systematically analyse them through a variety of semiotic approaches that are

distrainable as axiologies or ideologies and definable as models of action and manipulation. Sociosemiotics—insofar as such terminological distinction may be useful—would deal with the broad field of social connotations [translation mine].

After all, the same Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), who coined the term *semiology* (“*semiologie*”), defined it as a discipline dealing with the life of signs within social life:

A science that studies *the life of signs within society* is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology (from Greek *semeion* ‘sign’). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. ([ET 1959], 16, italics mine)

This social and intersubjective dimension, as remarked by Gianfranco Marrone (2001, XV), was somehow present also in the works and theorisations by other founding fathers of the semiotic field: Charles Sanders Peirce (1980) conceived semiotics as a new theory of communication, inscribing signs in a collective and institutional interpretative dimension; Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958) embraced a sociological theory of culture to describe and analyse the myths of some Amerind tribes; Roland Barthes (1964), considering semiology as a science dealing with signification processes, investigated reality as the place where symbolic entities are structured; Algirdas Julien Greimas (1970), reading any type of discourse through narrative schemes, conceived narrativity as a general interpretative hypothesis underlying social dynamics.

The research field recognising itself as “sociosemiotics”, however, is identified by focusing primarily on the social dimension conceived as an “effect of meaning”, which can therefore be analysed as a real “semiotic fact”.

L'objet empirique de la sociosémiotique se définit [...] comme l'ensemble des discours et des pratiques intervenant dans la constitution et/ou dans la transformation des conditions d'interaction entre sujets (individuels ou collectifs). Initialement centrée sur l'étude des systèmes (taxinomie des langages sociaux, systèmes de connotations sociales), la problématique se réoriente ainsi peu à peu – en empruntant l'essentiel de ses modèles à la grammaire narrative – vers une meilleure connaissance des procès sociosémiotique à l'œuvre dans ce qu'on appelle par ailleurs, en sociologie ou en histoire par exemple, le « changement » social. (Landowski 1986, 207)

(The empirical object of sociosemiotics is defined [...] as the set of discourses and practices involved in the formation and/or transformation of the conditions of interaction among—individual or collective—subjects. Initially focused on the study of systems—taxonomies of social lexemes, and social connotation systems—, the problem is now gradually turning toward a better understanding of the sociosemiotic processes operating in what is called, in sociology and in history, the social “change” [translation mine]).

In particular, according to Paul Copley and Anti Randviir (2009), sociosemiotics finds its sources and correspondences in different areas, embracing cultural anthropology (Kluckhohn 1961; Goodenough 1970; Keesing 1972; 1974; Rosaldo 1989), cultural semiotics (Shukman 1984; Randviir 2004), sociology, social psychology, and the social sciences (Kavolis 1995; Nikolaenko 1983; Ruesch 1972), as well as other disciplines (cf. Copley and Randviir 2009, 8–21). Beyond the discrepancies among these approaches, the main examples of combinations of signs and sign functioning they employ include topics such as social structure, dialogue, representation, multimodality, the Other, identity, genre (routinisation of

communicational forms), and motivation (Cobley and Randviir 2009, 22). In other words, the main aspect unifying all the different perspectives underlying the sociosemiotic eye consists—according to the two scholars—in sharing the same object of analysis: “signs in society”, that is, “the compound of individual, society, sign systems, and sociocultural reality” (*ibid.*).

Understanding human environments as (semiotically) constructed, or at least accessible via signs, has led to a common conception of the ‘whole’ of research objects. While the expressions used for the holistic web of mutually dependent and connected objects of study are often pretty diverse, they represent very similar treatments of humans, culture, and society. Consider ‘social world’ (Schutz 1967 [1932]), ‘social system’ (Parsons 1952), ‘culture’ (Kluckhohn 1961), *Lebenswelt* (Garfinkel 1967), ‘semiosphere’ (Lotman 1984), ‘mundane reason’ (Pollner 1987), ‘semiotic reality’ (Merrell 1992), even the ‘semiotic self’ (Wiley 1994) or ‘signifying order’ (Danesi 1998). These notions indicate that despite the disintegration of the social and human sciences into diverse ‘individual disciplines’ that happened alongside socio- and geopolitical developments attendant on the end of World War II, the study of ‘social structure(s)’ always tends to be ‘functional’ in one sense. (*ibid.*, 16)

From the “Anglo-Australian school” (e.g. Michael A. K. Halliday, Gunther Kress, and Theo Van Leeuwen) to the “Bari school” (e.g. Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, whose works are strongly influenced by Thomas A. Sebeok, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, Emmanuel Levinas, and Mikhail Bakhtin), from the Finnish strong pragmatist and Peircean tradition developed around the figure of Eero Tarasti to the centres working in Thessaloniki (Greece), Vienna (Austria), the same Tartu (Estonia), and many other “places of sociosemiotics” (Cobley and Randviir 2009, 24), different scholars and centres have adopted a sociosemiotic approach. Among

these, the fundamental works by Jean-Marie Floch and Eric Landowski, in France, and Gianfranco Marrone in Italy represent a key reference for the purposes of the present analysis. Before considering the main aspects of their researches,⁵ however, it is essential to point out that, despite the differences distinguishing each approach from the others, they all share a common basis, which is their characterisation as “semiotics of discourse”. Building on the projection of the textual model over sociocultural dynamics, they focus on social *practices*, assuming on the other hand *texts* and *discourses* as their main analysis tool, as they make objects—which seem not otherwise analysable—intelligible through the process of *textualisation*.

2.3.2.1 Jean-Marie Floch: Between Signs and Strategies

In 1990 the French state-owned public transport operator Ratp (*Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens*) asked Jean-Marie Floch to carry out a research concerning the journeys and behavioural typologies of the travellers of the metro in Paris. Convinced that signs, belonging to different dimensions, acquire their value within and by virtue of their contexts (cf. Floch 1990, 5), the semiotician accepted the challenge setting up an analysis based on various steps. The first phase consisted in carefully observing and taking note of the commute of some travellers, from the moment they entered until the moment they exited the metro. The aim was not to record the travellers’ discourse *on* their itineraries, but rather to register and analyse their *facts* and *gestures* within such routes, using interviews only later.

According to Floch, the commute represents a semiotically analysable text for different reasons:

- (1) It is circumscribed by a beginning and an end defining it as a

⁵ Cf. §2.3.2.1, §2.3.2.2, and §2.3.2.3.

relatively autonomous totality with an identifiable structural organisation;

- (2) It can be segmented into a finite number of units, phases, or moments, which are all united according to specific rules (so that it is possible to analyse it according to gestural macro-sequences—immobile/mobile, standing/sitting, rushed/lingering—or proxemics—opening/closing, distance/proximity);
- (3) It is endowed with a *sense*, that is, both a *meaning* and an *orientation* (cf. *ibid.*, 21).

Such a choice implies a retrospective point of view, according to which the journeys can be analysed as *narrative programs*: thanks to the *ethnographic* observation, followed by the individuation of some basic actions (entering, validating the ticket, accessing the platform, getting on the wagon, getting it off, exiting the metro) and the recognition of the spatial, temporal, and actorial segmentation characterising them, the commutes become significant processes composed of many *micro-accounts*. These micro-accounts are first transcribed and then confronted to find the *similarities* and *differences* among them (e.g. reading, listening to music, or knitting are considered “figures of concentration”, opposed to “figures of attention” such as looking at the outside view, holding a conversation, etc.), as well as the *recurrences* of certain behaviours.

Before proceeding with the analysis, nonetheless, it should be remarked that, on the methodological side, the French semiotician refused to use videos and cameras, opting instead for the pencil notation:

Une notation est de fait une construction, le choix fait d'un niveau de pertinence et donc d'analyse. Qui peut nier d'ailleurs que la prise de vue, ne serait-ce que par le cadrage et la profondeur de champ, pose de toutes façons le problème. A moins

de faire accroire qu'on a ainsi enregistré la « réalité ». La transcription des trajets s'est donc faite par objectivations successives pour aboutir à la réduction des phénomènes observés aux seules séquences gestuelles (mouvements et positions globales) qui en constituent la manifestation, et qui furent notées sur la fiche comme autant de micro-récits [...], abstraction faite [...] des âges et du sexe des voyageurs, de leur « personnes » : ils n'étaient alors, c'est vrai, que les sujets de tel ou tel verbe, les simples réalisateurs de tel ou tel programme d'action. Abstraction faite aussi [...] des raisons, du but de leur voyage. (*ibid.*, 23-25)

(Notation is *de facto* a construction, the choice of a level of pertinence and therefore of analysis. However, it is undeniable that filming, even only for the choices related to the shots and the depth of field, faces the same problem. Unless we want to give to understand that what has been filmed is "reality". The transcript of the commutes was therefore made through subsequent objectifications, resulting in the reduction of the observed phenomena only to the gestural sequences (global movements and positions) that constitute their manifestation. Such sequences were noted in the form of micro-accounts, [...] abstracting from the age and sex [...], from the real "people" realising them. At this stage of the analysis, they were just the subjects of this or that verb, the simple performers of this or that program of action. We also abstracted from [...] the reasons and purposes of their journeys ([translation mine]).

This process of abstraction allowed Floch to identify the semantic category “continuity” (surrendering to the flow, without paying attention to boundaries, and neutralizing the external space, which is reduced to an almost undefined background presence, cf. *ibid.*, 26) vs. “discontinuity” (looking for external rhythms, limits, and reiterations, cf. *ibid.*) and to analyse the noted information according to an interpretative hypothesis conceiving the commutes and the travellers’ actions and gestures as variables depending on strategies that, alternatively, segmented or homogenised the travelled space.

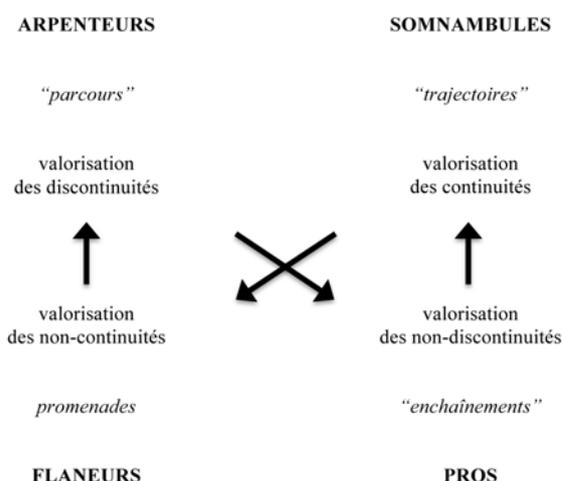


Figure 2 – Floch’s typologies of the travellers of the metro (1990, 32).

By projecting the category continuity/discontinuity over a semiotic square, the semiotician identifies four “types of travellers”, coinciding with four different valorisations of the journey considered as a textual practice: the *surveyors* (“arpenteurs”) prefer discontinuous journeys, generally looking for boundaries and delimitations and conceiving their itineraries such as variations and games of transformation producing meanings; the *pros* (“pros”), looking for non-discontinuous journeys, generally promote activities of desemantisation and abstraction letting them exalt their

knowledge and technical abilities; the *daydreamers* (“somnambules”), valorising continuity, consider the spatial dimension as a neutral entity that should be “covered up” by other signifying practices; finally, the *strollers* (“flâneurs”), seeking non-continuity, stroll around the metro stations without deciding anything in advance as they want to be surprised by unexpected events. As theoretical constructs, these typologies are related to each other and represent a set of behaviors remarking that every practice enacts a specific *use*, which is a way to reorganise and interpret cultural meanings.

In the second part of the study, building on these typologies, Floch moved to the investigation of the users’ perception of the metro (advertising, stations, stores) and their expectations, by means of an evaluation questionnaire—in which the user was asked to give an assessment in terms of numbers, choosing a value from 0 to 5—and some free comments about a few sketches depicting common scenes in the underground system.

Overlooking the details of the research, which is very well known not only in semiotics but also in other domains, it is essential to remark here that Floch’s approach has the merit of embracing methodologies typical of other disciplines—such as the ethnographic observation and the interview—without aiming at depicting a representative picture of how the metro is experienced by its users—as other disciplines, such as sociology, would do—, but rather at providing a partial picture of its *uses* and at showing how a semiotic model could be useful for the *field analysis*. Finally, it should be noted that, if on the one hand such perspective undeniably involves a reductionist approach—as the same scholar points out in his study—, on the other hand, it turns out to be very effective compared to the level of pertinence on which it is based and to the identification of the valorisations underlying the considered practices.

2.3.2.2 Eric Landowski: Interactions and Risk

As mentioned before, according to Eric Landowski (1986), the empirical object of sociosemiotics consists in the discourses involved in the formation and/or transformation of the conditions of interaction among subjects. According to the Parisian semiotician,

A sa façon, la sémiotique générale n'a cessé, dès le départ, de s'occuper du réel et, *a fortiori*, du social, conçus comme effets de sens. Formulée en termes succincts et volontairement naïfs, la grande question posée au sociosémioticien serait alors de rendre compte de « ce que nous faisons » pour que le social (ou le politique, etc.) existe en tant que tel pour nous : comment nous en construisons les objets et comment nous nous y inscrivons en tant que sujets parlants et agissants. (*ibid.*, 207)

(In its own way, general semiotics has never ceased to deal with reality and, *a fortiori*, the social world, conceived as effects of meaning. Formulated in succinct and voluntarily simple terms, the great question for the “sociosemiotician” is to account for ‘what we do’ so that the social world exists as such for us: how do we build its objects and how do we inscribe ourselves as speaking and acting subjects in them [translation mine]).

Landowski’s activity in the sociosemiotic field extends far beyond the theoretical dimension, embracing different and varied analyses, which range from the study of the political discourse and the public opinion (Landowski 1989) to the realm of objects (Landowski and Marrone 2001; Landowski

2009). In this context, it is particularly interesting to consider *Les interactions risquées*, where the French semiotician focuses on interactional practices building on the premise of the construction of meaning within a *situation*.

Notre objectif est de rendre compte en des termes homogènes de l'ensemble des processus interactifs dans lesquels nous pouvons nous trouver réellement engagés dans l'expérience vécue de tous les jours. (Landowski 2005, 43)

(We aim at consistently explaining all the interactive processes in which we can be effectively engaged in everyday experiences [translation mine]).

There is a substantial discrepancy between such a perspective and the most common studies in semiotics:

En réduisant à [des] syntagmes [canoniques] les processus et les rapports complexes [...] qu'engage le développement des passions, on soumet ce terrain particulièrement sensible à une vision rationalisante et au fond pragmatiste qui ne laisse guère de place à ce qu'on peut appeler candidement la « sensibilité ». Et surtout, une telle démarche conduit à privilégier par principe un point de vue unilatéral sur les rapports d'interaction, comme si nous n'étions jamais, tour à tour, que les manipulateurs ou les programmeurs les uns des autres. La syntaxe de la manipulation, autant que celle de la programmation [...], introduit ainsi dans l'observations du réel, c'est-à-dire des textes et des

pratiques, un biais qui conduit à en ignorer d'autres aspects, peut-être même, dans certains cas (par une sorte de déformation professionnelle), à négliger certaines possibilités sur le plan de l'expérience vécue. (*ibid.*, 46)

(By reducing the complex processes and relations [...] implied by the development of passions to canonical syntagms, we subordinate this particularly sensitive field to a rationalistic and all in all pragmatic vision that leaves little room to what may be unpretentiously called "perception". And most importantly, such an approach tends to favour in principle a unilateral perspective on interaction relations, as if simply were, in turn, manipulators or programmers one each other. The syntax of manipulation, as well as the one of programming, thus introduces into the observations of reality, that is, texts and practices, an imprecision leading to ignore some of its aspects and sometimes (due to a sort of professional deformation), perhaps, even to overlook some possibilities at the level of the lived experience [translation mine]).

Landowski proposes here to renovate and integrate the Greimasian model, although he does not provide the reader with a proper discussion on the processes and methods of construction of the object of a "semiotics of experiences".

On the other hand, it is essential to remark his elaboration of a grid for the interpretation of social interactions. According to the Parisian scholar, the complexity characterising social interactions cannot be reduced to the typologies of the narrative syntax, which includes two basic logics of interaction: a programmed principle, modalized according to the emotional

point of view (*passion*) and related to a logic of causality, in terms of “if . . . , then”; and a logic of manipulation, modalized according to a cognitive-epistemic principle (belief) and associated with motivation and credence. One of the major virtues of *Les interactions risquées* is to implement this model with the individuation of other systems based on the logics of irregularity, risk, randomness, chance, and possibility, thus overcoming its impossibility to cover all the possibilities related to social life.

In Landowski’s view, there are four regimes underlying construction of meaning identifiable with four phases or modes through which the subject relates to the Other during an interaction: the regime of *programming* (“régime de la programmation”) is based on the principle of *regularity* and arises when the aims previously set by the subjects are achieved; the regime of *manipulation* (“régime de la manipulation”), founded on the logic of *intentionality*, follows the classic model of interaction between a subject and an object; the regime of *adjustment* (“régime de l’ajustement”), based on the logic of *perception*, refers to the progressive acquisition of special skills and expresses insecurity; finally, the regime of *accident* (“régime de l’accident”) is based on the logic of *chance* and *risk*, therefore opposing particularly to the system of programming since it is untied from any pre-established behaviour.

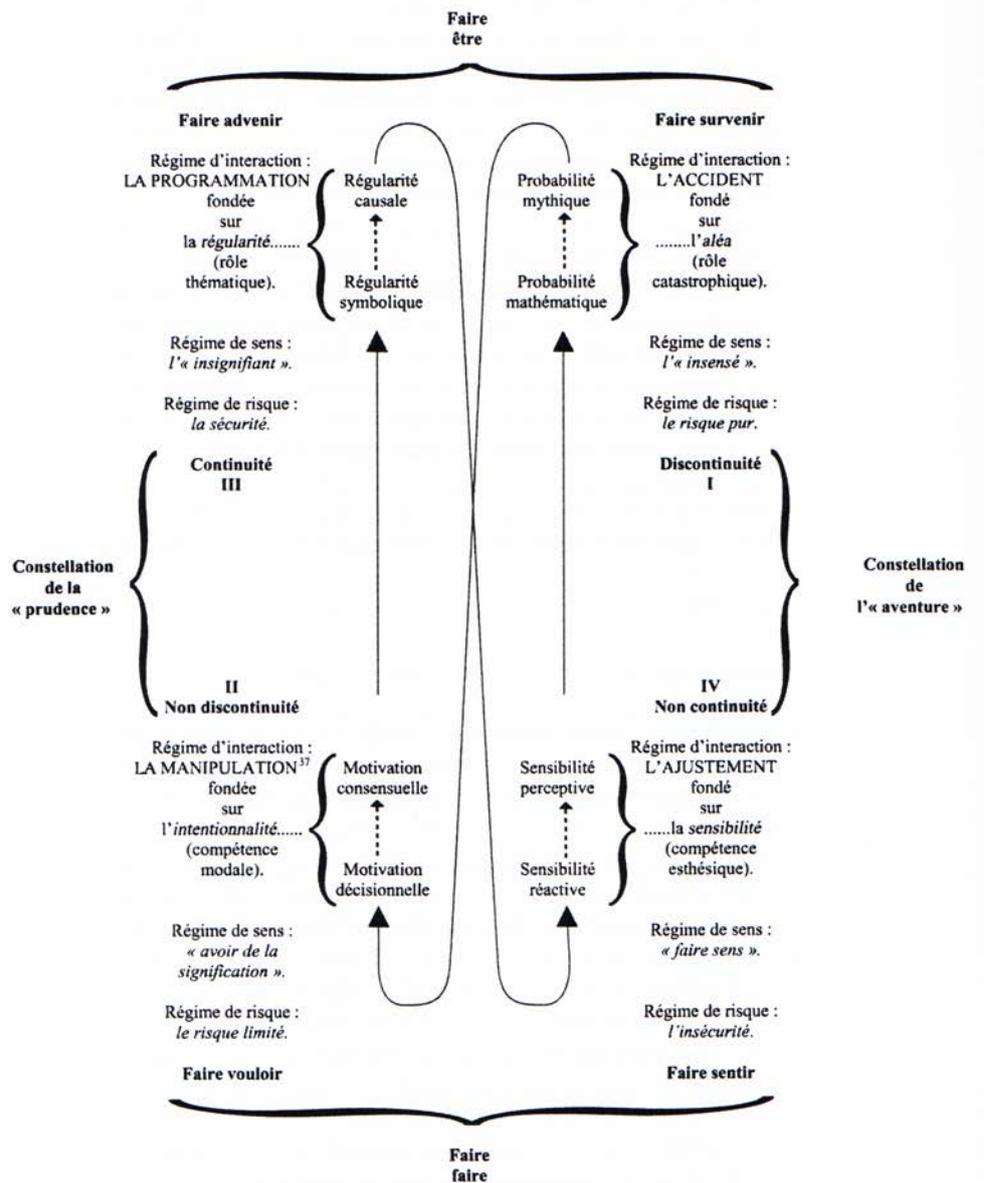


Figure 3 – Landowski's grid for the interpretation of social interactions (2005, 72).

This model originates no more a semiotic a square, as it is generally conceived and used in semiotics, but rather an elliptic scheme (Fig. 3) where curves replace straight lines in order to point out that it is no more the case of a change from a state to another state (*punctual* aspectualization), but

rather of a gradual transition (*durative* aspectualization) from a position to another.

Par ce « carré sémiotique » amodié dans le sens de la gradualité et du devenir, nous cherchons à souligner le fait que nous nous trouvons en présence d'un *continuum* au long duquel chacun a vocation à circuler et, au prix de métamorphoses successives, à devenir autre que ce qu'il croit être tout en apprenant peu à peu non seulement vers quoi le portent ses goûts, mais surtout pour quelles raisons c'est ceci plutôt que cela que lui plaît. (Landowski 2004, 268)

(Through this “semiotic square” opportunely modified to include gradualness and transformation, we aim at highlighting the fact that we are in presence of a *continuum* along which everyone is intended to move and, at the price of successive metamorphoses, to become different from what he believes to be, while learning gradually not only where his tastes lead him, but also why he likes some things more than some others [translation mine]).

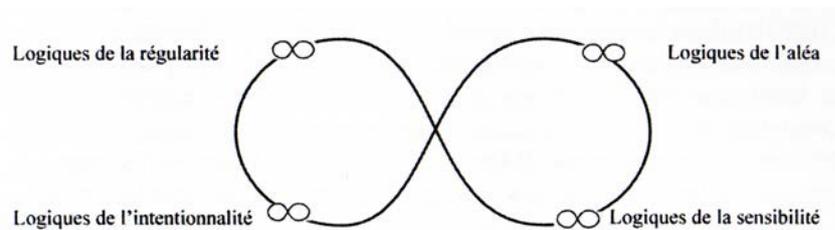
Moreover, it is important to notice the presence of dotted arrows in the scheme, whose function is to express on the visual level the movements of the subject within each regime of interaction, referring to a transition in a binary opposition characterising each one of the logics (regularity, intentionality, perception, or risk) described. Although representing a binary opposition, however, Landowski's model does not recall a relation in terms of discontinuity:

Notre intention est tout au plus d'indiquer le genre de processus de mutations, internes à chaque régime, qu'il s'agirait d'analyser à partir de corpus textuels précis ou de pratiques empiriquement observables, l'objectif étant alors de cerner le devenir structural propre de chacun des styles de vie correspondants. Dans cette perspective, il est à prévoir que les oppositions binaires auxquelles nous nous en tenons ici — deux formes d'aléa, de motivation, de régularité, de sensibilité — se révéleraient vite insuffisantes. (*ibid.*, 76)

(Our intention is at the most to specify the type of processes of changes internal to each scheme, which would be analysed from specific textual corpus or empirically observable practices, with the aim to identify the structural becoming of each corresponding lifestyle. In this perspective, it is expected that the binary oppositions considered here—two forms of risk, intentionality, regularity, and perception—would quickly prove inadequate [translation mine]).

Despite the choice of adopting dotted arrows responds to a need for simplification,⁶ the model is based on a second level of elliptic movements within each position, assuming a fractal configuration within which the same structure is present at different levels.

⁶ As Landowski remarks, the discussion about the elliptic internal logics depicted in Fig. 4 goes beyond the aim of the research presented in *Les interactions risquées* (cf. 2005, 76).



**Figure 4 – Landowski’s grid for the interpretation of social interactions
– Internal Logics (2005, 76).**

Finally, it is interesting to remark the analogies between this system and Floch’s research (1990) on the commutes of travellers in the Parisian metro: focusing on how the subject interacts with the world and/or other subjects, rather than on the logics underlying the valorisations of a journey, both models try to build up a reading grid to analyse social practices, establishing a typology of subjects and describing certain *lifestyles* (“styles de vie”). Such lifestyles, which are described as “differentiated, general ways of being in the world” (Landowski 2005, 58 [translation mine]), correspond somehow to the concept of *forms of life* elaborated in philosophy by Ludwig Wittgenstein (“Lebensform”, 1953; 1967) and then by Jacques Fontanille (“formes de vie”, 1993), who himself defines them on the basis of a specific relation between the subject and the objects in the world, or among different subjects.⁷

2.3.2.3 Gianfranco Marrone: The “Constructed Empiry”

Gianfranco Marrone is an Italian semiotician whose interest in sociosemiotics has lead him to deal with different topics, from media (cf. in particular 1998; 2001) to urban spatiality (2001; 2005a; 2010; 2013;

⁷ For the reconsideration of Floch’s typologies in terms of *forms of life*, cf. Fontanille 2008.

Marrone and Pezzini 2006; 2007), from food (Marrone and Giannitrapani 2012; Mangano and Marrone 2013) to body (Marrone 2001; 2005b), from advertising (2001; 2007a) to Nature (2011a; 2012). His prolific research activity seems to respond to the need for a definition of sociosemiotics, not by proposing abstract speculations on the topic, or theoretical hybridisations whose efficacy should be analysed *a posteriori* (cf. Marrone 2001, X), but rather by analysing the same object of sociosemiotics *on the field*. Accepting Landowski's invitation (1997a) to *practice* semiotics rather than to *speak* of it, he covers different topics generally studied by sociology building on semiotic tools and methodologies, while testing the same capabilities of a semiotic approach to fit with such investigations and refining its categories of analysis. According to Marrone,

L'obiettivo della sociosemiotica non è [...] semplicemente quello di rivolgere il proprio sguardo su alcuni oggetti tradizionalmente studiati dai sociologi, esportando nelle scienze sociali modelli e categorie che possano costituire una loro ulteriore metodologia. [...] Più che una metodologia sociologica, essa si pone come una sociologia *critica*, nel senso kantiano della termine, una disciplina che non studia direttamente il sociale ma le sue condizioni di possibilità. Semioticamente, infatti, il sociale non è un dato empirico bruto di cui svelare le leggi più o meno nascoste, ma un *effetto di senso* costruito di cui occorre individuare le procedure che lo hanno posto in essere. (2001, XVI-XVII)

(The aim of sociosemiotics [...] is not simply to focus on some objects traditionally studied by sociologists, exporting its models and categories to the realm of social sciences in order to use them as

possible alternative methodologies. [...] More than a sociological methodology, it represents a *critical* sociology, in the Kantian sense of the term, that is, a discipline which does not study directly social reality, but rather its conditions of possibility. Semiotically, social reality is not a raw empirical element whose more or less hidden rules should be revealed, but an *effect of meaning* whose procedures of emergence should be identified [translation mine]).

Although sharing Landowski and Floch's point of view on the importance of reading social reality through the lens of semiotics, the Italian sociosemiotician's approach somehow differs from theirs, as it does not keep within the lines of the projection of a textual model on practices as a methodological necessity, recognising instead that also certain social phenomena (including practices) may have the same fundamental properties of other texts (multiplanarity, coherence, closure, stratification of levels, etc.), even if they have a different configuration (cf. Marrone 2007b, 240). This implies no difference in principle between *semiotics of text* and *sociosemiotics*:

La prima non fa altro che progressivamente esportare i propri modelli d'analisi, resi operativi a partire da occorrenze testuali che il senso comune è portato a riconoscere come tali (racconti, poesie, film, quadri...), verso tutte quelle altre occorrenze testuali che il medesimo senso comune fa invece fatica a riconoscere come tali, pensandole semmai come fenomeni sociali più ampi e più sfuggenti, ai quali viene riconosciuto di solito il ruolo di contesti, situazioni comunicative, circostanze di ricezione, relazioni intersoggettive e simili. Ragionare in

termini di testi e contesti significa ipostatizzare, cioè individuare a priori, sia i primi sia i secondi, per poi magari cercarne relazioni e dipendenze. Ma se qualsiasi fenomeno sociale può essere ripensato come un testo, come appunto ritiene la semiotica, è solo dopo averne volta per volta ricostruito le articolazioni interne ed esterne che riesce possibile distinguere ciò che ha natura testuale (ossia che è pertinente nella costituzione del senso) da ciò che invece ha natura contestuale (e che allora non è pertinente ai fini di quella stessa costituzione). (Marrone 2011b, IX-X)

(The first one does nothing but progressively export its models of analysis, which are made operational building on textual occurrences that common sense is brought to recognise as such (tales, poems, movies, paintings, etc.), to all those other textual occurrences that the same common sense is barely able to recognise as such, identifying them as broader and more elusive social phenomena, to which the role of contexts, communicative situations, circumstances of reception, intersubjective relationships, and so on is generally attributed. Thinking in terms of texts and contexts means hypostatizing, that is, identifying *a priori* both the former and the latter, and only later maybe looking for their relationships and dependencies. But if any social phenomenon can be rethought as a text, as semiotics does state, it is only after having rebuilt from time to time the internal and external joints that what has a textual nature (i.e. which is pertinent for the establishment of meaning) can be distinguished from what has instead a contextual nature (i.e. which is not pertinent for the purposes

of that same foundation) [translation mine]).

Beyond the interesting analyses proposed by Marrone,⁸ it is essential to remark that, despite simply promoting the projection of a textual model on practices in order to make them intelligible, he presents a model of analysis based on the idea of a “constructed empiry” (2007b, 246):

L’oggetto che la semiotica pone al suo cosiddetto “livello empirico” – la semiosi – non ha nulla di banalmente empirico: non è mai dato come tale, ma viene prima costruito e poi posto come se fosse un dato, viene costruito artificialmente come dato naturale. (*ibid.*)

(The object that semiotics puts at its so-called “empirical level”—semiosis—has nothing of trivially empirical: it is never given as such, but it is first built and then presented as it was given as such; it is artificially built as a natural fact [translation mine]).

It is precisely such “constructed” nature of its object that allows (socio)semiotics to examine and explain the articulation of practices and experiences through its lens and tools of analysis. According to this perspective, in fact, the object of knowledge—and therefore of semiosis—is at the same time a given fact (thus representing the starting point of immanent descriptions) and a constructed element (with the need of justifying the process of construction at a methodological and epistemological level). There are not only *texts-objects*, but also *texts-models*:

⁸ Which cannot be discussed further here. For more details, cf. all the works cited in the opening of the paragraph, as well as in the final bibliography.

In fondo, tutti i testi sono costruiti, salvo che certuni – obliando o nascondendo il lavoro necessario per produrli – *divengono* oggetti, dati ontologici; mentre altri mantengono la consapevolezza del loro essere costruiti, e possono essere usati per costruire realtà testuali ulteriori. (*ibid.*, 247–248)

(In the end, all texts are constructed, except that some of them—forgetting or hiding the work required to produce them—*become* objects, ontological data; while others maintain awareness of their constructed nature, so that they can be used to build additional textual realities [translation mine]).

Preferring Derrida’s motto (1967) “il n’y a pas de hors texte” (“there is nothing outside the text”) to Greimas’ “hors du texte pas de salut” (“outside the text, there is no salvation”, 1987), Marrone (1997b) maintains that there is no an “outside-text”, as if we go “outside” of a text, we necessarily find another one, in a perspective according to which the context corresponds to what is not pertinent for the purposes of a specific intersubjective relation, a social practice, etc. Once anything within it is recognised as pertinent, it should be considered as a textual fact (cf. *ibid.*, 250).

Ciò non vuol dire accettare l’idea di una decostruzione infinita e indeterminata, di un passaggio vorticoso e incontrollato da un testo all’altro, in una deriva interpretativa in cui tutto è uguale a tutto [...]. Sono infatti, localmente, le forme discorsive soggiacenti (testualizzate) che dettano non solo le pertinenze dei singoli testi, ma anche le regole di passaggio da un testo a un altro, regole traduttive – linguistiche, semiotiche – più o

meno forti, più o meno deboli, trasgredibili e rivedibili caso per caso, ma poi in ogni caso esplicitabili, manifestabili testualmente, e dunque sempre oggetto di possibile negoziazione, disputa ermeneutica e regolamentazione sociale. Le diverse culture, in altri termini, rendono possibili certe traduzioni e interpretazioni, e al tempo stesso ne rendono impossibili delle altre, che sa[ra]nno magari possibili in altri luoghi o altri tempi. (*ibid.*)

(This does not mean accepting the idea of an infinite and indeterminate deconstruction, of a whirling and uncontrolled passage from a text to another, resulting in an interpretative drift where everything is equal to everything [...]. In fact, there are, locally, underlying discursive (textualised) forms that dictate not only the pertinences of individual texts, but also the rules of transposition from a text to another:—linguistic, semiotic—rules of translation, which can be more or less strong, more or less weak, transgressable and reviewable depending on the situation. Such rules, however, are in any case explainable, textually expressible, and therefore always subject to possible negotiation, hermeneutic dispute, and social regulation. Different cultures, in other words, enable certain translations and interpretations, while making some others—which could be possible in other places or other times—impossible [translation mine]).

Therefore, it is not the case—Marrone (*ibid.*, 251) concludes—of focusing on the metaphysical issue of the genesis or dissolution of meaning,

or of “going beyond the limits of texts”,⁹ but rather of reconsidering the same concept of *textuality*, analysing how somatic experiences and social practices find expression in different contents and forms surrounding us, from literary texts to movies, from foods and beverages to the commutes of the travellers of the metro.

2.3.3 Ethno-semiotics

According to Greimas and Courtés’ *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage* (1979), ethno-semiotics does not truly represent an independent semiotics:

L’ethnosémiotique n’est pas, à vrai dire, une sémiotique autonome — elle entrerait alors en concurrence avec un champ du savoir déjà constitué sous le nom d’ethnologie ou d’anthropologie, dont la contribution à l’avènement de la sémiotique elle-même est considérable —, mais bien plutôt un domaine privilégié de curiosités et d’exercices méthodologiques. [...] A l’intérieur de cette discipline, un lieu de rencontre s’est constitué, entre ethnologues et sémioticiens, sous le nom d’*ethnolinguistique*, qui, dépassant la simple description des langues naturelles exotiques, s’est intéressé, dès l’origine, à leurs particularités sémantiques (qui se prêtaient à des approches contrastives et comparatives). C’est probablement à la vocation propre à l’anthropologie, désireuse de saisir les totalités, d’appréhender des ensembles signifiants, que l’on

⁹ Marrone particularly criticises Jacques Fontanille’s perspective, according to which the same semiotic practice goes beyond the textual limits, focusing on architecture, objects design, marketing strategies, and so on (cf. 2005; 2006). In Marrone’s view (2007a), Floch’s analyses (1990), as well as Landowski’s theorisations (1989; 1997; 2005; Landowski and Marrone 2001), do not refuse the Greimasian motto “hors du texte pas de salut”, but rather enlarge it according to Derrida’s one, which is at the same time its counterbalance and its completion.

doit le développement des recherches taxinomiques. La description — et surtout l'élaboration méthodologique qu'elle présuppose — des *ethnotaxinomies* : taxinomies grammaticales d'abord [...], taxinomies lexicales ensuite [...], taxinomies connotatives enfin, constitue une contribution importante à la théorie sémiotique générale. C'est au domaine, recouvert par l'ethnosémiotique, que revient le mérite d'avoir conçu, inauguré et fondé, à côté des descriptions paradigmatiques que sont les ethnotaxinomies, les analyses syntagmatiques portant sur les différents genres de la littérature ethnique, tels que les récits folkloriques (V. Propp) et mythiques (G. Dumézil, C. Lévi-Strauss), et grâce auxquelles s'est renouvelée la problématique du discours littéraire. Si de telles recherches ont permis à la sémiotique générale de progresser rapidement, il est normal que celle-ci veuille rendre maintenant, au moins en partie, la dette qu'elle a contractée, en suggérant la possibilité de nouvelles approches des discours ethno littéraires. La *sémiotique littéraire* se trouve ainsi opposée à la sémiotique littéraire [...] sans que la frontière qui les sépare puisse être établie de manière catégorique. [...] Etant donné que la sémiotique générale autorise à traiter les enchaînements syntagmatiques non linguistiques (gestuels, somatiques, etc.), le cadre d'exercice de l'ethnolinguistique s'élargit vers une ethnosémiotique : les analyses, encore peu nombreuses, des rituels et des cérémoniaux, laissent supposer que l'ethnologie est susceptible de devenir, une fois de plus, le lieu privilégié de la construction de modèles généraux des comportements signifiants. (Greimas and Courtés 1979, 133-136)

(Ethnosemiotics is not, in fact, an autonomous semiotics— it would therefore compete with a field of knowledge already known with the name of ethnology or

anthropology, whose contribution to the advent of semiotics itself is significant—, but rather a preferential domain of intellectual curiosity and methodological exercise. [...] Within this discipline, the encounter between anthropologists and semioticians was set up taking the shape of what is called *ethnolinguistics*, which, going beyond the mere description of exotic natural languages, has focused, since its origins, on their semantic features (which well fitted with contrastive and comparative approaches). It is probably the typical vocation of anthropology, aiming at grasping totalities, and at comprehending meaningful wholes, which has caused the development of taxonomic researches. The description—and especially the methodological elaboration that it presupposes—of *ethnotaxonomies*: first grammatical taxonomies [...], then lexical taxonomies [...], finally connotative taxonomies, constitute an important contribution to the general semiotic theory. The area covered by ethnosemiotics has the merit of having conceived, inaugurated, and founded, in addition to the paradigmatic descriptions of ethnotaxonomies, the syntagmatic analyses carried out on different genres of ethnic literature, such as folk (V. Propp) and mythical (G. Dumézil, C. Lévi-Strauss) tales. Moreover, thanks to ethnosemiotics, the issue of literary discourse has been renewed. If such researches have lead general semiotics to advance rapidly, it is normal that it wants now to solve its debt, at least partially, suggesting the possibility of new approaches to ethno-literary discourses. Ethno-literary semiotics is thus opposed to literary semiotics [...] without the possibility to trace a categorical border between them. [...] Since according to general semiotics we can treat non-linguistic (gestural, somatic, etc.) syntagmatic chains as discourses or texts, the sphere of action of ethnolinguistics extends to *ethnosemiotics*: the analyses, yet not so

abundant, of rituals and ceremonials suggest that ethnology is likely to become, once again, the best place for the construction of general models for signifying behaviours [translation mine]).

Such a description efficaciously points out the profound uncertainty related to the theoretical foundations of ethnosemiotics: hanging in the balance between anthropology, ethnology, ethnography, and semiotics, it represents a field of research whose definition and methodologies are not easy to define. Dean MacCannel (1979), for example, describes ethnosemiotics as “a new anthropology” including “research on the production of culture as interpretation motivated by social differences [and] turning existing anthropological insight derived from the study of remote groups back onto our own social life” (151). On the other hand, according to Francesco Marsciani, author of *Tracciati di Etnosemiotica* (2007), any structural analysis of practices necessarily implies a semiotic approach:

Gli agenti, che per lo più sono attori sociali dotati di competenze sulla base delle quali diventa possibile una loro definizione narrativa, si muovono e trasformano se stessi, gli altri e il mondo che li circonda all'interno di campi relazionali che costituiscono veri propri intorni significativi, orizzonti significanti. (9)

The agents, who are mainly social actors with competences making it possible to define them from a narrative point of view, move and transform themselves, the others, and the world surrounding them within relational fields that constitute real signified environments, and signifying horizons ([translation mine]).

An ethnosemiotic approach would certainly be based on observation, thus embracing fields such as ethnology and anthropology—as stated by Greimas and Courtés (1979)—, but there are differences that should not be forgotten or overlooked. First of all, according to Tarcisio Lancioni and Francesco Marsciani (2007), ethnosemiotics represents “a semiotics of methodological control, a semiotics of observation, a semiotics of reformulation” (67 [translation mine]), which does not simply coincide with an ethnographic semiotics, but constitutes a real means of validation and control of the same ethnological and ethnographic approach. Building on narrative grammar, ethnosemiotics aims at analysing the processes of signification related to social practices: unlike sociosemiotics, which is based on the re-integration of a text into a network of meta- and intra-textual relations and on a process of deduction of theoretical models building on the analysis of social dynamics and practices, it focuses primarily on social activity and its observation (cf. Marsciani 2007; Lancioni and Marsciani 2007, 69-70).¹⁰

According to Francesco Remotti (1988), anthropology can be conceived as a form of *anthropophagy*:

Chi sono gli antropologi, se non cacciatori di umanità? Che cosa fanno di antropologi se non procurarsi delle «proteine simboliche» (Scarduelli m.s.)? Che cosa è l'antropologia se non un'alimentazione del pensiero occidentale mediante sostanziosi cibi esotici, sotto forma – direbbe Clifford Geertz (1987: 62) – di «notizie da un altro paese»? L'antropologia è la nostra forma di eso-cannibalismo, un tentativo grandioso e ramificato, fortemente specializzato in molti sensi, di incorporare in noi l'“altro”. Ma la nostra antropologia conosce pure una variante endo-cannibalica, dal momento che il pensiero occidentale ha provveduto molto spesso a identificare i primitivi (selvaggi o barbari che fossero), di cui andava a caccia, con i propri antenati

¹⁰ Nevertheless it should be said that there is no general consensus on this point, as the classification of these two approaches is still not clear nor adequately defined.

più lontani (gli Indiani d'America come i Greci antichi).
(19)

(Who are anthropologists, if not hunters of humanity? What do they do if not catching “symbolic proteins” (Scarduelli m.s.)? What is anthropology if not feeding Western thought through nutritious exotic foods, in the form—Clifford Geertz (1987: 62) would say—of “news from another country”? Anthropology is our form of exo-cannibalism, a big and pronged effort, highly specialised in different ways, to incorporate the “Other”. But our anthropology also has an endo-cannibalistic dimension, as Western thought has very often identified the primitives (were they savages or barbarians), which it was “hunting”, with its more distant ancestors (the American Indians as the ancient Greeks) [translation mine]).

Through the metaphor of cannibalism, the Italian scholar describes anthropology as an activity based on “eating the Other”, that is, trying to integrate and assimilate him. Similarly but, somehow in a different way, semiotics—and, particularly, ethnosemiotics—*observes* the Other, aiming not at eating him, in terms of knowledge or identity, but rather at grasping (or “eating”) and describing the processes through which he valorises and gives sense to the world, precisely that same world where they are both located (cf. Marsciani 2007, 15). The domain of ethnosemiotics would therefore correspond to

The study of interpretations which are generated by cultural differentiation. When cultures change, or collide with one another, or when their illogicality is exposed, the shocks and disjunctions lead to creative activities: explanations, excuses, accounts, myths. (I am using creative here in a non-evaluative way: the bringing into being of something new, a new evil as well as good, a new weakness as well as strength.) These interpretations, if

accepted at the group level may themselves eventually become aspect of culture: that is, they may form into a substantial basis for cultural differences which must be interpreted in turn. This is the ongoing synthesis of center and periphery, the engine of perpetual cultural production. (MacCannel 1979, 153)

But what does “observing the Other” mean for the “ethnosemiotician”? According to Marsciani, it implies a *field* research requiring the analyst to personally observe the object of the analysis with his/her proper eyes, building on the results of such observation for the reconstruction *a posteriori* of its meaning. This presupposes the acceptance of some basic assumptions and, particularly, of the fact that the value of what is observed depends on the relation between the observer and the observed:

Tali considerazioni mettono al centro del problema etnosemiotico la questione della significazione interna alle pratiche stesse. In altri termini, l'osservatore non può non compiere simultaneamente due passi: riconoscere, da un lato, che le pratiche si inseriscono in una circolazione sempre data di senso già articolato (sono già impregnate di senso interpretato e assunto: gli agenti non soltanto divengono, agiscono e agire è da subito reinterpretare senso), e riconoscere dall'altro che la propria domanda di intelligibilità ed esplicitazione determina una messa a fuoco sempre specifica e orientata sulle salienze e sui dati rilevati. (*ibid.*, 11)

(Such considerations lead ethnosemiotics to focus on the issue of the signification internal to practices themselves. In other words, the observer simultaneously performs two processes: on the one hand, recognising that practices are part of a broader circulation of meaning which is already

articulated (they are already drenched of interpreted and assumed sense: agents not only become, they act; and to act means in any case to reinterpret meanings); on the other hand, recognising that his demand for intelligibility and clarification determines a specific focus, oriented to specific saliencies and collected data [translation mine]).

Echoing Clifford Geertz (1973), according to which the ethnographic observation represents an interpretation of interpretations, Marsciani stresses the *constructed* nature of ethnosemiotics, since it relies on the process of observation, which lacks transparency, definiteness, and clarity. Representing itself a practice involving a certain degree of interpretation of the observed practice, observation always involves the subjectivity of the observer, which, being such observer part of a specific cultural sphere, is compulsorily a constituent inter-subjectivity (2007, 14). The main aim of a ethnosemiotics, therefore, should be to individuate a proper methodology to make the observation of practices as systematic and verifiable as possible, without denying the role of the dynamics related to (inter-)subjectivity, but trying to set some parameters to somehow control them.

This is precisely what Marsciani aims at showing in *Tracciati di etnosemiotica*, where, ranging from the analysis of the spatial and corporeal dimension in four different contexts related to body care (the dentist's room, the doctor studio, the hair salon, and the beauty centre) to the observation of the structures of dealers and shops, from the study of the flowing of people in a certain urban area to the exploration of the configuration of bread, rusks, and crackers, the Italian scholar efficaciously sketches a series of predicable behaviours, gestural modalities, and observed practices, pointing out the processes of production and redefinition of sense within them.

2.3.4 Between Texts and Practices

As we have seen, dealing with daily practices has important implications not only with respect to the semiotic object, but also on the methodological side. When semiotics extends to the domain of social action and dynamics, taking the shape of *sociosemiotics* or, as other scholars support, of *ethnosemiotics*, it is pushed towards fields of application typical of other disciplines like sociology, anthropology, ethnology, and ethnography. It is not a coincidence that, in the previous paragraphs—and also in Chapter 1, when approaching the issue of food-related practices—, we encountered the names of different anthropologists, ethnologists, or sociologists, like Clifford Geertz, Pierre Bourdieu, and Erving Goffman, or even “hybrid” figures, such as Eric Landowski. In addition to these names, we could also mention Harold Garfinkel (1967) or Alessandro Dal Lago and Pier Paolo Giglioli (1983), who present an interesting overview of ethnomethodology; or Michel de Certeau (1980), who theorises the possibility of considering practices as *tactics* re-interpreting dominant meanings, which are interpretable through the category of enunciation; and many others.

Although the different studies and essays devoted to these issues, there is still—in semiotics as in other disciplines—no consensus on the status of practices and, above all, on the methodologies underlying their observation and registration, as well as their analysis. Specifically, in the semiotic field, Landowski (2003) stresses the importance of the negotiated nature of interpretation, supporting the necessity of interpreting any text as a *situated* practice: if it is undeniable that texts and practices differ on the level of expression—as the former are closed and static objects, while the latter are instead open and dynamic—, it is also true that, as texts acquire their meanings through a practice, practices themselves can also be analysed as texts. Similarly, as we have seen, Marrone (2007b), distinguishing between text-object and text-model, supports the idea of a common nature for texts and practices, as they are both *constructed* (by their producers/performers, as well as by their readers and researchers). Marsciani (2007; cf. also Lancioni and

Marsciani 2008), once individuated and highlighted the role of the process of observation, analyses the observed practices and objects as *narrated experience*, and therefore as texts. Following in this same wake, Maria Pia Pozzato (1995) collects the studies of different scholars¹¹ approaching practices as forms of *aestheticisation* of daily life.

In addition to these studies, methodological questions have increasingly caught the attention of other scholars in the field, whose discussion on the topic is still very active and in a way problematic. Among many others, Jacques Fontanille (1998; 2006; 2008; 2010) and Pierluigi Basso Fossali (2006; 2008a; 2008b) have proposed new models for the analysis of practices and the understanding of the question of observation, while other scholars have proposed examples or reflections on the use of specific tools for this kind of research, such as video recording (cf. Stupiggia and Violi 2007), focus groups (Greco 2012), interviews or questionnaires (Floch 1990), and direct observation (Marsciani 2007). Nonetheless, a systematic theorisation of such issues is still missing, and this field of analysis is *in fieri*. The discrepancies concerning the concepts of text, discourse, and practice have therefore resulted in a proliferation of schools: as previously mentioned, while some scholars define themselves as “sociosemioticians”, some others prefer to identify themselves with ethnosemiotics, or rather a “semiotics of practices”.

On the other hand, all these approaches find a common basis in their choice of re-inserting the textual object in a cultural frame characterised by a deep interest in social phenomena, leading their representatives—regardless of the name and affiliation they choose for themselves or the others—to consider texts as inseparable from their contexts. In other words, if it is evident that the analysis of practices still represents an open question generating different perspectives and methodologies—which risk sometimes to take the shape of a confused or even deafening polyphony—, it is also true that such a “chorality of voices” is the result

¹¹ In alphabetical order: Denis Bertrand, Jean M. Floch, Jacques Fontanille, Gérard Imbert, Algirdas J. Greimas, Eric Landowski, Yves Luginbühl, Yves Plasseraud, Ted Polhemus, Maria Pia Pozzato, Jean Sellier, and Jean-Didier Urbain.

of a growing interest in social life and a deep transformation of semiotics itself, which needs to be enhanced and at the same time critically analysed in each of its steps.

It is in this sense that it is necessary to integrate different perspectives and disciplines, combining them in different ways depending on the peculiarities of the analysed case studies. Aware of such a necessity, we will try in the following to keep different points of view together, in order to show how they are all essential to fully understand sociocultural phenomena—as the ones related to food are.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to trace some “borders”: as mentioned in Chapter 1, focusing on food opens the way to numerous developments and perspectives, inviting scholars to range from anthropology to sociology, from semiotics to history and geography. Similarly, even within the semiotic field, it implies including different approaches, from textual analysis to new studies on practices. It becomes therefore necessary to define some basic parameters to circumscribe the field within which carry out the research, with reference both to the methodological dimension and to the definition of the corpus and the research criteria. The following chapter will be devoted to these aspects.

CHAPTER 3 – THE FIELD OF ANALYSIS

Abstract

Chapter 3 introduces the criteria underlying the definition of the analysed corpus, as well as the tools and the structure of the research. The ethnic meal is here considered as it is consumed in public restaurants, particularly focusing on the dinner, according to a main aspect, that is, the conception of the meal as a moment of enjoyment and relax. Specifically, attention is paid to those cases where the quality and costs of the services make it more plausible that the choice of the restaurant (by the consumers) is not due to economical or practical reasons, but rather to a real interest—or even just a sort of curiosity—toward a particular kind of ethnic food or eating experience. After clarifying the double structure of the research (“desk analysis” and “field analysis”), the main aspects underlying the establishment of the examined corpus are set, explaining “what” (the Japanese foodsphere), “why” (e.g. authenticity and symbolism), “when” (April 2011–November 2013), and “where” (Canada, Italy, and Switzerland, according to specific criteria) was taken into consideration for the present analysis. Finally, a particular remark illustrates the intention of focusing principally on the “eater”, that is, more on the side of consumption than that of production, giving priority not only to the material and textual dimensions, but also and above all to different levels of analysis concerning the spatial dimension and corporeality.

3.1 Defining the Field of Analysis: Research Criteria, Corpus, and Analysis Tools

After considering the major theoretical and methodological reference frames for the research, it is necessary to present the criteria for carrying it out, as well as the standards underlying the definition of the analysed corpus and the tools and structure of the research.

3.1.1 Research Criteria

We have already mentioned the intention of focusing on *ethnic food*. Nevertheless, including such a field of analysis both food service and markets, as well as many other factors, it is necessary to circumscribe it further and describe it more in depth. We will deal in the following with the *ethnic meal* as it is consumed in public *restaurants*, particularly focusing on the *dinner*, which, among the “regular occasions [...] when food is served and eaten” (Collins 2013), has largely become the most important eating occurrence for people living in Western contemporary societies. If lunch is generally relegated to a short break (in most cases, from 30 to 60 minutes) between the work hours, as new rhythms of life have arisen, dinner has progressively become the moment when anyone, sometimes preferring eating out instead of having supper at home, can live the eating experience as a moment of pleasure and relax, generally enjoying it with his/her family or friends.¹

We will consider in the following paragraph the details concerning the analysed corpus of analysis (type of food, features of the restaurants, etc.). Here we would like to remark that the main criterion underlying the selection of specific case studies is the conception of the meal as a moment of enjoyment and relax: specifically, we will consider in the following those cases where the quality and costs of the services make it more plausible that the choice of the restaurant (by

¹ While it is more likely to have lunch alone or with colleagues or acquaintances.

the consumers) is not due to economical or practical reasons, but rather to a real interest—or even just a sort of curiosity—toward a particular kind of food or eating experience.

3.1.2 Corpus of Analysis

As mentioned before, dealing with *ethnic* food implies the assumption of an external and foreign look, which, while getting in contact with a specific culinary system, redefines it according to its own cultural background. In other words, food becomes ethnic every time it is eaten, bought, or somehow “redefined” outside of its original place.

The presence of ethnic food is a crucial characteristic of contemporary western societies, where it is present in diverse forms, from fast foods to refined restaurants, from street food services to many commercial facilities. We have already mentioned the intention of focusing on restaurants and, specifically, on the moment of dinner. The following paragraphs will introduce the criteria of pertinence through which it has been possible to select, within the ample and very varied conformation of contemporary foodspheres, the most significant case studies for the present research.

3.1.2.1 “What” and “Why”

Within the varied sphere of ethnic food services in contemporary western societies, we decided to focus on *Japanese restaurants* in three specific contexts. The reasons for such a choice can be resumed with reference to two main aspects: *authenticity* and *symbolism*.

3.1.2.1.1 Authenticity

Although Japanese cuisine has considerably changed over time and is today subjected to numerous forms of *fusion* that continuously reinterpret it, mixing its ingredients and recipes with elements typical of other culinary cultures, it is considered one of the most “traditional”² of the world. The same Japanese refer to their own cuisine with different terms, distinguishing *washoku* (和食), also known as *nihon-ryōri* (日本料理), which is the Japanese cuisine preceding the Meiji period,³ generally including “the traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2012, 3), from the so-called *yōshoku* (洋食, literally “western food”), which has spread in the country after the end of the *Sakoku*, the foreign relations policy stating that no foreigner person—or food—could enter Japan and no Japanese could leave it.

Added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in December 2013, *washoku* is celebrated worldwide for its centuries-old cooking techniques and recipes and it is generally recognised as a refined cuisine, requiring fresh and high-quality ingredients and entailing elevated costs. On the other hand, the spread of Asian fast foods or “all-you-can-eat” services, together with the increasing appearance of Japanese restaurants held by Chinese, Koreans, or people from other Asian countries, more inclined to mix traditional foods and recipes with other Asian—or even local—

² The same concept of *tradition* is complex and would need to be further analysed. It is impossible to consider here each aspect of this delicate and extremely interesting issue—with which we will deal again in the conclusions—, but it is essential to point out how tradition itself is not a static element, but rather a dynamic process involving continuous transformations and changes—and so, in a sense, a series of *translations*. For more details on these aspects and the idea of “invention of tradition”, cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983 and Stano 2012 and 2014. Nonetheless, we will consider here the terms *tradition* and *traditional* in the most common sense, that is, referring to “the body of customs, thought, practices, etc., belonging to a particular country, people, family, or institution over a relatively long period” (Collins 2013).

³ The Meiji period (September 1868 – July 1912) represents the first half of the Empire of Japan, characterised by a process of modernisation of Japan, with fundamental changes affecting its social structure, internal politics, economy, military, and foreign relations.

cuisines, has brought to the diffusion of many hybrid forms—of services, foods, and practices—, which are not always as close to “the traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese” as they claim to be. This is certainly one of the reasons that have brought to the assignation of heritage status to *washoku*, an honour that had previously been given only to the French cuisine. Even before of the United Nations designation, the decision to “protect” Japan’s “traditional” cuisine found expression in a bureaucratic manoeuvre: in November 2006, the then-Agricultural Minister Toshikatsu Matsuoka, established a government-backed seal of “authenticity” for Japanese restaurants abroad. Despite the economical problems related to the operation and its promoter, in addition to the accusations of corruption moved against the JRO (*Organization to Promote Japanese Restaurants Abroad*)—whose declared main aims were to recommend “authentic” Japanese restaurants in an effort “to avoid spreading a wrong image of Japanese food” (Keio University’s Aoi, JRO’s board, 2007) and offering training courses in Japan and abroad—, it is necessary to remark the great attention devoted to the issue of authenticity and, particularly, to the need of maintaining it when Japanese food becomes “ethnic” food.

For this reason, we decided to focus on some of the most known and renowned Japanese restaurants abroad:⁴ the high costs generally characterising these services make it more plausible that the selection of such restaurants is not based on economical (as for the “buffet options”) or practical (as for the many facilities serving local or ethnic foods in shopping centres) reasons, but rather linked to a voluntary choice based on curiosity, enjoyment, and desire of a specific kind of food—and /or atmosphere.

However, mindful of Ferdinand de Saussure’s lesson (1922), then echoed and further developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1964), we could

⁴ For more detailed information about the place of analysis, cf. §3.2.2.

not forget the importance of *differences* for the emergence of sense. Therefore, we decided to adopt a contrastive approach, choosing, in every selected context of analysis, two case studies: a restaurant where the “traces” left by translation processes seemed to be concealed as much as possible, that is, one of those places usually referred to as “traditional” Japanese restaurants;⁵ and a restaurant where the translation processes were instead explicitly showed, presenting the place as a sort of Japanese reality never separated from the frame in which it is inserted.

The implications of such choices will be taken into consideration throughout the analysis. In this context it is sufficient to remark that the analysed corpus consists in some selected Japanese restaurants abroad, sometimes openly expressing the “translation” processes, sometimes trying to conceal them, but in any case believed to strongly rely on the concept of *authenticity*, which represents not only a big concern for the Japanese government, but also a key parameter for the evaluations of food services proposed by print or digital guides, as well as by bloggers and other people participating in discussion forums.⁶

3.2.1.2 Symbolism

Japanese cuisine is highly symbolic. With its emphasis on harmony, equilibrium, naturalness, and the passing of seasons, for example, *washoku* has been compared to *haiku* poems, which are known for their seasonal reference (*kigo*), as well as for their structure (consisting of 17 *on* or *morae*, organised in three phrases of 5, 7, and 5 *on* respectively, thus suggesting the idea of harmony and balance), and the so-called *kiru*, or “cutting”, which generally consists in the juxtaposition of two images

⁵ Although, as previously mentioned, the concept of tradition does not imply the absence of translations, representing instead the result of continuous practices of *re-writing*. Cf. also Chapter 6.

⁶ Which represent the main tools used for the definition of the corpus of analysis.

or ideas and a *kireji* (“cutting word”) between them—just as Japanese foods are normally “cut” and carefully separated when disposed on the plate. Not only this: as Roland Barthes points out in *L’empire des signes*⁷ (1970),

The [Japanese] dinner tray seems a picture of the most delicate order: it is a frame containing, against a dark background, various objects (bowls, boxes, saucers, chopsticks, tiny piles of food, a little gray ginger, a few shreds of orange vegetable, a background of brown sauce) and since these containers and these bits of food are slight in quantity, but numerous, it might be said that these trays fulfill the definition of a painting which, according to Piero della Francesca, “is merely a demonstration of surfaces and bodies becoming ever smaller or larger according to their term.” However, such an order, delicious when it appears, is destined to be undone, recomposed according to the very rhythm of eating. ([ET 1982], 11)

Dynamic tableau, or rather—as Barthes specifies—*palette*, the Japanese plate represents “a workbench or chessboard, the space not of seeing but of doing—of *praxis* or play” (*ibid.*), whose relation with the realm of painting does not correspond only to food’s visible qualities, but also to the corporeal dimension: at a more abstract and intense level, the act of *touching* of the hand completes the effects that colours, “orders”, and symmetries have on the eyes (cf. *ibid.*, 12). Even the same utensils used to eat as to prepare food, *chopsticks*, do not serve uniquely the purpose of moving foods (from the cutting board to the plate, from the plate to the mouth, etc.), but have a *deictic* function: they indicate food, making each

⁷ English Translation *Empire of Signs*, 1982.

piece exist as they reveal and choose it (cf. *ibid*, 16).⁸

Moreover, as we will discuss further in the following chapter, many ingredients, as *rice*—which is the staple of the Japanese diet (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2012, 5) and, for this reason, represents one of the main issues we will focus on—are deeply imbued with symbolism, which is further reinforced by a feature characterising not only Japanese food but different aspects of Japanese culture: the concept of *wrapping*.

3.1.2.2 “Where” and “When”

Figure 5 shows a map representing the geographical frame selected for the analysis: 6 Japanese restaurants located in Canada (2), Italy (2), and Switzerland (2).

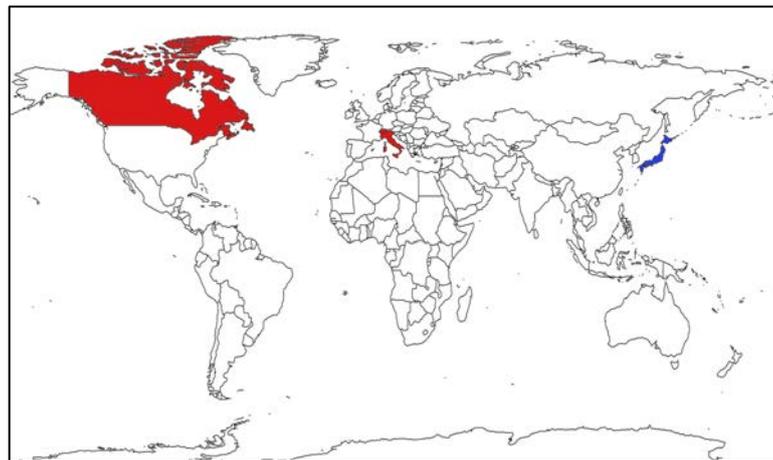


Figure 5 – Map representing the geographical frame of the research (Canadian, Italian, and Swiss translations”—red—of the Japanese culinary system—blue).

In order to enhance the contrastive approach based on the comparison of restaurants trying to conceal the translation processes, on the one hand, and services showing them off, on the other hand, we decided to consider

⁸ For more details on this issue, cf. §4.2.

different backgrounds for the choice of the restaurants to analyse.

Place	Translation Processes Showed Off	Translation Processes Hidden
Italy	Arcadia (Turin)	Wasabi (Turin)
Canada	Guu Izakaya (Toronto)	Shinobu (Toronto)
Switzerland	Ginger (Zurich)	Sansui (Geneva)

Table 2 – The corpus of analysis.

Particularly, we decided to compare:

- Italy, where local food is generally regarded as one of the most representative aspects of national identity: although the Italian gastronomic universe includes many regional and local components which are not reducible to a single tradition and to a few stereotyped dishes, Italians’ collective passion for their “own” cuisine makes reference to a well-defined and limited *imaginarium* which constitutes the basis of a universally recognised very strong “tradition”.⁹ Particularly, in the Italian context, we decided to focus on Turin, not only because it was a well known reality for us, but also because it has become one of the major gastronomic centres in the country, hosting important events such as *Salone del Gusto*, *Terra Madre*, *Ciocolato*, etc. and many of the highest standard national gastronomic services.
- Switzerland, where the political configuration, based on a federal structure subdivided in 26 cantons, which were fully sovereign states until the quite recent establishment of the federal state (1848) and still maintain their own constitution, legislature, government, and courts, makes the country—and, by consequence, its sociocultural background—fragmented and very varied. This heterogeneity therefore

⁹ For more details on this topic, cf. Stano 2012 and 2014.

characterises also the foodsphere, within which it is not possible to identify a single dominant “tradition” as it is generally intended, but rather many local gastronomic universes that are strongly influenced by the adjacent countries. In such context, we decided to focus primarily on Zurich (*canton of Zürich*), the largest city in Switzerland, and Geneva (*canton of Geneva*), the second most populous city in the country and the most populous one of Romandy, the French-speaking part of Switzerland, which are also very known and important at an international and representative level.

- Canada, where the huge flows of immigration have led the country to assume a well-established multicultural configuration, which reflects also in the gastronomic sphere. In particular, Toronto is very well known for its culinary background, generally recognised as the best of the country, as well as for being one of the major poles where such a multicultural nature is manifest and solid.

Within these backgrounds, building on the evaluations of food services proposed by print or digital guides, as well as by bloggers and other people participating in discussion forums, we identified some significant case studies: *Wasabi* and *Arcadia* in Italy (Turin); *Guu Izakaya* and *Shinobu* in Canada (Toronto); and *Ginger* (Zurich) and *Sansui* (Geneva) in Switzerland. Such realities, whose detailed information will be provided throughout the analysis,¹⁰ were analysed from April 2011 to November 2013,¹¹ according to some specific aspects that will be discussed further in the following paragraph.

¹⁰ Cf. Chapter 5.

¹¹ Canadian case studies: from February to August 2013; Italian and Swiss case studies: different periods throughout the entire lapse of time.

3.1.3 Analysis Tools

After having presented the main information concerning the corpus of analysis, it is necessary to focus on the methodological tools and procedures used to examine the selected case studies. First of all, it should be said that the research will be based on a double structure: a *desk* analysis involving the research, synthesis, and comparison of information on the Japanese culinary culture, specifically focusing on some of its most significant elements *par excellence* (such as *rice* and the practice of *wrapping*), as well as on some specific aspects whose significance was noticed during the second part of the study, and so later reconsidered through the lens of the so-called secondary research; and a *fieldwork*, based on direct observation at the selected restaurants on various occasions (from April 2011 to November 2013).

As mentioned before, analysing the foodsphere from a semiotic point of view implies considering different approaches. Building on the methodological remarks presented in Chapter 2, as well as on the theoretical premises outlined in Chapter 1, we will focus primarily on:

- The analysis of the most significant *ingredients* and *plates*, considered not only in their material dimension, but also and above all as texts that can be examined through a semiotic approach (figurative and plastic levels, syntagmatic and paradigmatic analysis, etc.);
- The textual dimension of the *menu* (verbal and visual elements related to “translation” processes, syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes, material and visual configurations, etc.);
- The *spatial* dimension (with respect to the arrangement of different components within each course and various foods inside the plate, but also to the table, the proxemic patterns, and the macro-level of the dining space);
- *Corporeality* (proxemics, the use of specific utensils, the so-called “techniques of the body”, the concept of incorporation, etc.);

Many other aspects, such as *temporality* (e.g. specific valorisations arising from particular syntagmatic configurations) or specific elements of the *visual identity* of the considered cases studies, will be also considered when necessary. More details will be presented throughout the analysis; in this context it is important to remark that the intention is to focus principally on the “eater”, that is, more on the side of consumption than that of production. Definitely, even within this context, the mentioned elements do not use up all the analysable aspects, which could include many other interesting topics, such as taste, for example, but cannot be further developed here, as we will discuss further in the conclusions.

SECTION 3

THE RESEARCH:

THE JAPANESE FOODSPHERE AND ITS “TRANSLATIONS”

CHAPTER 4 – DESK ANALYSIS

Abstract

Chapter 4 deals with the desk analysis: the opening paragraph presents the main features of washoku, the traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, ranging from ingredients to cooking techniques, from the tableware to the dining environment, from utensils to umami. Particular attention is devoted to chopsticks, which are analysed through the semiotic lens, comparing them with the Western common cutlery. Paragraph 4.3 introduces another concept that is central not only to washoku but, more generally speaking, to the Japanese semiosphere: tsutsumi, an expression generally translated as “wrapping”. After presenting the main features and areas of interest of the “wrapping principle”, such idea is adopted as a key criterion for the analysis of the same Japanese foodsphere, leading to interesting observations as regards the semantic level. Finally, the last paragraphs draw the attention to rice, the staple of Japanese cuisine, and particularly to sushi, which is generally recognised as the most representative element of washoku. The description of the most common typologies of sushi, including some of its Western variations, therefore opens the way to their semiotic analysis, where the concept of wrapping plays again a crucial role.

4.1 *Washoku*: Preliminary Remarks on Japanese Food

Generally referred to as *washoku*, “the traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2012, 3) are known especially for being based on a deep respect for the natural world, with a particular emphasis on seasonality, the design of plates heralding the arrival of the natural periods of the year, and the attempt to preserve the natural flavours of foods as much as possible. The numerous cookbooks (cf. in particular Andoh 2010; 2012; Shimbo 2000), encyclopaedias (cf. in particular Kiple and Ornelas 2000), and food history volumes (cf. in particular Seligman 1994; Ishige 2001; Kumakura 2002) written about Japanese cuisine usually stress the importance of fresh and natural ingredients, particularly vegetables:

When discussing Japan’s dietary customs, mention must be made of harvested crops that are preserved in the form of pickles and stored away for winter consumption. The expertise to preserve the essential flavor and nutrients of the seasonal vegetables has been passed down in each region of Japan, leading to the creation of various kinds of pickles based on their respective climates and the crops.

One of the main reasons Japan’s dietary customs have come to be recognized as healthy in other countries is that vegetables are central to *washoku*. Along with vegetables such as Japanese parsley, *mitsuba* parsley, *udo* (Japanese spikenard), and *wasabi* (Japanese horseradish)—which are native to Japan, of course—daikon radishes, turnips, edible burdocks, leeks, eggplants, cucumbers, and numerous other vegetables have been brought from other countries for over a millennium and flourished because Japan’s geographical environment is suitable for cultivating vegetables. Whether stewed, broiled, or deep-fried as tempura, these vegetables form the core *washoku* as ingredients that offer a sense of the season. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2012, 7)

Freshness is a key parameter not only for the selection of vegetables, but also for the choice and preservation of fish¹ and sea food, which, generally served raw, represent some of the most important components of *washoku*, together with rice, the previously mentioned vegetables, and soups. The so-called *ichiju sansai*, or “traditional Japanese-style meal”, for example, is based on some basic elements: rice, soup, and three side dishes (soybean products, such as tofu, pickled vegetables, seaweed, etc.). These foods are generally subjected to different cooking techniques, which range from boiling (*simmering*²), grilling, or steaming to deep-frying (*tempura*³), fermenting, or serving raw (as in the case of *sashimi* and *sushi*). Commonly dishes are flavoured using a combination of soy sauce, *sake*,⁴ vinegar, *dashi*,⁵ *mirin*,⁶ or various herbs and spices (like *ginger*, *wasabi*, or *takanotsume*). With respect to flavours, moreover, it is essential to remark that, together with sweet, sour, bitter, and salty, the Japanese cuisine strongly valorises *umami*, the so-called “pleasant savoury taste”.⁷ Umami is tasted through receptors for glutamate, generally found in its salt form as the food additive monosodium glutamate.

¹ Different skilful techniques are used to maintain such freshness. In the case of fish, for example, *ikejime* is generally adopted: after having drained the blood by cutting under the gills and at the base of the tail, a wire is inserted in the backbone to remove the nerves and the fish is killed, thus delaying *rigor mortis*.

² Simmering is a food preparation technique requiring to cook foods in hot liquids kept at or just below the boiling point of water, but higher than poaching temperature. Ensuring gentler treatment than boiling, it is used to prevent food from toughening or breaking up.

³ Seafood and vegetables are battered in cold water and wheat flour and then deep-fried.

⁴ Generally referred to as *nihonshu* (日本酒, “Japanese liquor”) in Japan, *sake* is an alcoholic beverage of Japanese origin made from fermented rice.

⁵ A typical Japanese cooking stock used for miso soup, noodle broth, and other simmering liquids.

⁶ A sort of rice wine similar to sake, but with a lower alcohol content and higher sugar content.

⁷ More than as a flavour or a taste, however, *umami* is generally described as a “feeling”, or rather as the *balance* or proper combination of flavours, textures, and products (cf. Gelb 2011). For more details, cf. Barbot, Matsuhisa and Mikuni 2009; Yamaguchi and Ninomiya 1999.

4.2 Beyond Food: From the Table to the Dining Room

In addition to specific ingredients and cooking techniques, *washoku* is based on peculiar parameters related to the dining environment, the tableware, the preparation and visual presentation of foods, and particular features of the service. Tasted with the consumers' eyes, along with their tongue, the typical Japanese meal pays particular attention to *kaiseki-ryōri*, which is the collection of skills and techniques underlying the preparation and presentation of meals (which are also known as *kaiseki* or *kaiseki-ryōri*).⁸

A major element of this is the tableware. In the West, people often use tableware with identical designs and materials in a set, but over the course of a Japanese meal, the tableware for each food shows the difference in materials, such as clay (clayware), stone (ceramics), painted materials (lacquerware), and so on. Even if [Japanese] use tableware made of clay for more than one dish in the same course, it is the usual practice that the dish be made by different potter or have an entirely different design. The traditional serving style of a *washoku* meal is to place small amounts of each food into small plates or bowls with differing designs, lining them up neatly on top of an *ozen* tray. The food and the tableware must be created to complement each other. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2012, 15)

The tableware is subjected to a process of parcelling, which echoes the common practice of dismemberment and division of the same food. This double movement of fragmentation and separation contributes to stress the discrepancies between the Western and the Eastern foodsphere. According to Roland Barthes (1970), whereas the former is

⁸ There are basically two kinds of traditional Japanese meal styles called *kaiseki* or *kaiseki-ryōri*: when *kaiseki* is written as 会席 (and *kaiseki-ryōri* as 会席料理), it refers to a set menu of select food served on an individual tray; when it is written 懐石 or 懐石料理 (or sometimes 茶懐石, *cha-kaiseki*), it refers to the simple meal that the host of a *chanoyu*—the Japanese tea ceremony—gathering serves to the guests before a ceremonial tea (cf. Tsuji 1972; Tsutsui 1987; Murata 2006).

characterised by values such as abundance and grandness, the latter is connoted by the convergence of what is tiny with what is edible and the propensity for the infinitesimal (15). Foods are cut and reduced to small dimensions, with interesting implications at the syntagmatic level, as instead of being served one after the other, courses are generally brought to the table all at the same time.⁹ Moreover, it is interesting to consider the utensils generally used to eat: Western forks, knives, and spoons are substituted by *chopsticks* (Fig. 6), the common “thin sticks, of ivory, wood, etc., used as eating utensils by the Chinese, Japanese, and other people of East Asia” (Collins 2013).



Figure 6 – Japanese wooden chopsticks and chopstick rest (© 毛抜き).

Building on Floch’s analyses (1995a, 181–214)—which follow in Greimas’ footsteps (1973; 1987)—and Barthes’ observations on the Japanese meal (1970), chopsticks¹⁰ can be analysed as follows. With respect to the *configuration*¹¹ component, in all kind of chopsticks—which can be made of wood, plastic, ivory, etc.—we can distinguish two basic parts: a thicker part, at the top; and a thinner, pointed part, at the bottom (Fig. 7).

⁹ For this reason, Roland Barthes (1970) refers to the Japanese meal as a “collection of fragments” without any pre-established order of ingestion: to eat is not to respect a menu (an itinerary of dishes), but to select, with a light touch of the chopsticks, sometimes one color, sometimes another, depending on a kind of inspiration” ([ET 1982], 22).

¹⁰ Among the different existing types, we will deal in the following with Japanese chopsticks (in Japanese *ohashi*, 箸; also known as *otemoto*, おてもと, when they are used in restaurants or any other public eating place).

¹¹ “Décomposant l’objet en ses parties constitutives et le recomposant comme une forme” (Greimas 1973, 15; “Subdividing the object into its parts and recomposing it as a single form” in Floch 1995a [ET 2000, 149]).

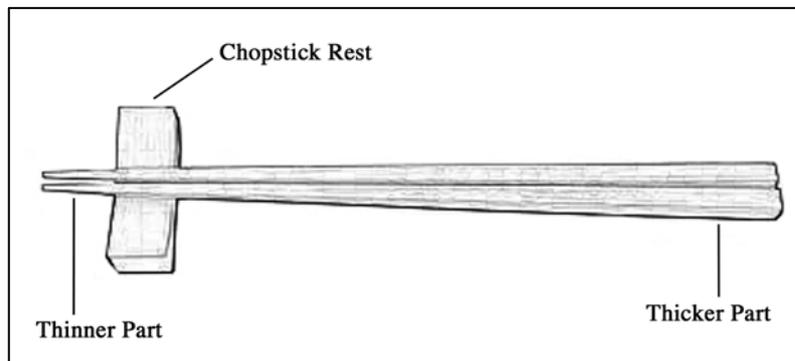
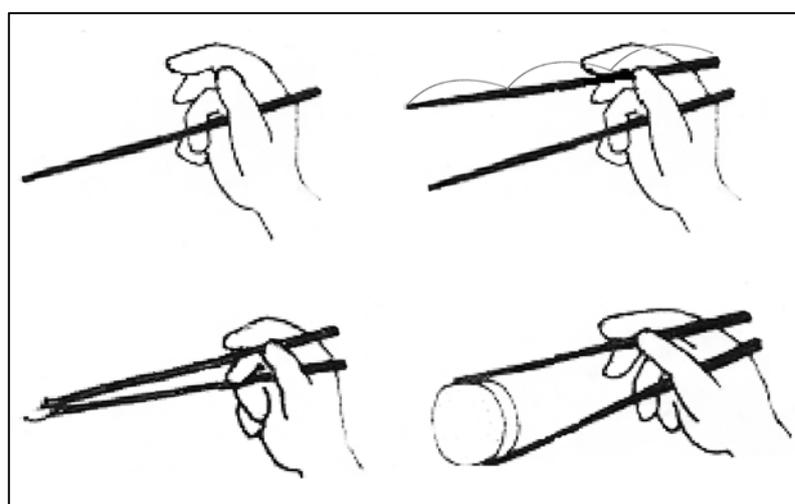


Figure 7 – Japanese wooden chopsticks and chopstick rest: configuration analysis.

While *ohashi* (Japanese for “reusable chopsticks”) are not used, the thinner ends generally rest on a chopstick rest (in Japanese 箸置き, “hashioki”)—which could be made of wood, stone, ceramic, cloth, etc.—, while the thicker parts lean on the table (or any material covering it). When the chopstick rest is not available—as it is often the case in restaurants using *waribashi* (disposable chopsticks)—, the paper case containing the chopsticks can be folded and used for this aim. It is also interesting that, according to the Japanese etiquette, chopsticks should be placed in a right–left direction, with the thinner end on the left. By contrast, placing them diagonally or vertically, as well as crossing them, is not acceptable.



**Figure 8 – How to use Japanese chopsticks
(personal elaboration building on different online sources).**

In order to use chopsticks, the eater should hold one of them in place, while moving the other one to pick up morsels. The first chopstick should be placed so that the thicker part rests at the base of the eater's thumb, whereas the thinner part rests on the lower side of the hand's middle fingertip. Then, the thumb should move forward—approximately until covering one third from the thicker end—so that the stick will be firmly maintained in place. Finally, the other chopstick should be positioned so that it is held against the side of the index finger and by the end of the thumb, and the ends of the chopsticks are even. According to the Japanese etiquette, food cannot be transferred from one's own chopsticks to someone else's ones, while sticks can be reversed to use the opposite clean end in order to move food from a communal plate, in case there are no communal chopsticks. Furthermore, when using *waribashi*, they should be replaced into the wrapping paper at the end of the meal.

Such description introduces another essential level of analysis: the *functional*¹² component. As observed by Roland Barthes (1970), the relation between Eastern food and chopsticks—is not purely practical, “instrumental” ([ET 1982], 16): sticks not only serve the purpose of taking the food on the plate and bringing it to the mouth, but they have also a *deictic* function, as they point, designate, and choose each morsel, thus making it exist. In this way, chopsticks affect the same eating experience, marking it in an *aesthetic/ludic* or *utopic* sense—as Floch (1990) would say building on Barthes' statement that they introduce a sort of creative and capricious spirit in the consumption of food (1970 [ET 1982], 16)—rather than according to *use* values: more than a mechanical operation, eating is conceived as an *intelligent* act (*ibid.*). Another crucial element that should be considered is that sticks are always used in pairs: sticking or piercing *hashi* into food is not acceptable, and morsels should be rather picked up and moved by taking them in between the two sticks. To be more precise, the eater should move the upper chopstick down to firmly hold the morsel, but without applying too much pressure: the utensil never cuts, slits, or “pinches” food, but it simply raises, turns, or carries it. Even when chopsticks are used to divide—as in the case of *ryoribashi*, used

¹² “Tant pratique que mythique (prestige, puissance, évation, etc.)” (Greimas 1973, 15; “Whether practical or mythic (prestige, power, escape, and so forth)” in Floch 1995a [ET 2000, 149]).

for cooking, and *saibashi*, used to transfer cooked food to the dishes where they will be served¹³—, they do not slice or violently pierce food, but rather separate and delicately part it, always following the *natural* interstices of the substance.¹⁴

These considerations are very interesting for the analysis of the *taxic*¹⁵ component, according to which the object should be examined in its differential traits with respect to other objects of the same typology. Particularly, in the case of chopsticks, it is useful to focus on the eating utensils commonly used in the Western world: knives and forks.¹⁶

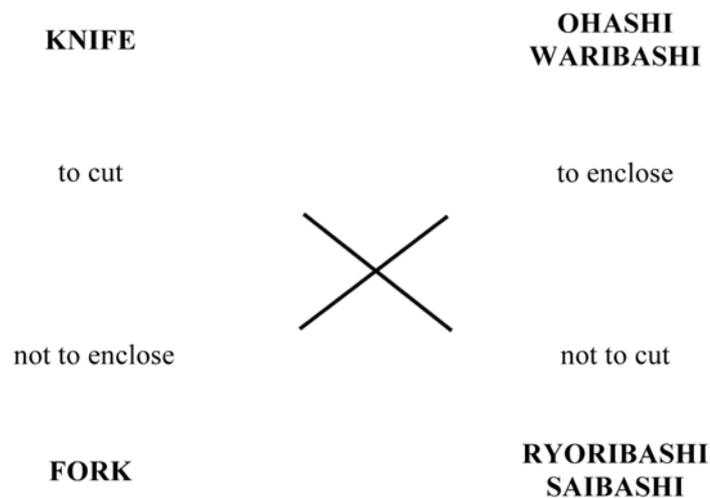


Figure 9 – Semiotic square of the most common Western and Eastern eating utensils.

The main difference opposing Eastern and Western eating utensils can be described in terms of a contrast between the act of *cutting* food, slicing and sectioning it, and the practice of *enclosing* it, without modifying its form or configuration. By projecting such

¹³ Cf. Shimbo 2000.

¹⁴ Whereas the very acts of cutting and separating are reserved to knives and fingers. Barthes specifies that “in this, [chopsticks are] much closer to the primitive finger than to the knife” (1970 [ET 1982], 18).

¹⁵ “Rendant compte par ses traits différentiels de son statut d’objet parmi les autres objets manufacturés” (Greimas 1973, 15; “Accounting via its differential traits for its status as an object among other manufactured objects” in Floch 1995a [ET 2000, 149]).

¹⁶ As further discussed below, it is worth to consider spoons separately, as they are present in both the Western and the Easter foodsphere—although in different forms—, and can be used in different ways.

opposition on a semiotic square (Fig. 9), we can classify the utensils as follows: the Western knife—as the knives used by Japanese cooks when needed—is generally used to cut foods, segmenting big portions into smaller slices or even morsels, while the chopsticks commonly used by Eastern eaters (either *ohashi* or *waribashi*) do not interfere in any way with their configuration or compactness, simply enclosing—or, in other words, *wrapping*¹⁷—them and refusing “to mutilate, to trip” (Barthes 1970 [1982], 18). As regards the contradiction relations, while fork can be interpreted as the negation of *ohashi* and *waribashi*, as it does not enclose foods, penetrating and piercing them, the chopsticks generally used by Japanese cooks (*ryoribashi* and *saibashi*) represent the contradictory term of knife, as they do not slice or cut food, but rather separate and delicately part it, always following its natural fissures.

In addition to the utensils, great attention is usually devoted to the other elements of tableware. Beyond the aspects mentioned above, according to Jun’ichiro Tanizaki (1993), darkness and opacity should be preferred to shining lights and glittering materials, and lacquerware should be used more than ceramic:

We much prefer the “impure” varieties of crystal with opaque veins crossing their depths. [...] We do not dislike everything that shines, but we do prefer a pensive luster to a shallow brilliance, a murky light that, whether in a stone or an artifact, bespeaks a sheen of antiquity. Of course this “sheen of antiquity” of which we hear so much is in fact the glow of grime. In both Chinese and Japanese the words denoting this glow describe a polish that comes of being touched over and over again, a sheen produced by the oils that naturally permeate an object over long years of handling—which is to say grime. [...] Darkness is an indispensable element of the beauty of lacquerware. Nowadays they make even a white lacquer, but the lacquerware of the past was finished in black, brown, or red, colors built up of countless layers of darkness, the inevitable product of the darkness in which life was lived. [...] Ceramics are by no means inadequate as tableware, but they lack the shadows, the depth of lacquerware. Ceramics are heavy and cold to the

¹⁷ Cf. §4.3.1.

touch; they clatter and clink, and being efficient conductors of heat are not the best containers for hot foods. But lacquerware is light and soft to the touch, and gives off hardly a sound. I know few greater pleasures than holding a lacquer soup bowl in my hands, feeling upon my palms the weight of the liquid and its mild warmth. The sensation is something like that of holding a plump newborn baby. There are good reasons why lacquer soup bowls are still used, qualities which ceramic bowls simply do not possess. Remove the lid from a ceramic bowl, and there lies the soup, every nuance of its substance and color revealed. With lacquerware there is a beauty in that moment between removing the lid and lifting the bowl to the mouth when one gazes at the still, silent liquid in the dark depths of the bowl, its color hardly differing from that of the bowl itself. What lies within the darkness one cannot distinguish, but the palm senses the gentle movements of the liquid, vapour rises from within forming droplets on the rim, and the fragrance carried upon the vapour brings a delicate anticipation. What a world of difference there is between this moment and the moment when soup is served in Western style, in a pale, shallow bowl. A moment of mystery, it might almost be called, a moment of trance. (11-15)

Convinced that Japanese cooking depends on shadows and is inseparable from darkness (*ibid.*, 16–17), Tanizaki does not circumscribe his reflections to the tableware, embracing also the description of the *dining environment*:

And so it has come to be that the beauty of a Japanese room depends on a variation of shadows—it has nothing else. Westerners are amazed at the simplicity of Japanese rooms, perceiving in them no more than ashen walls bereft of ornament. Their reaction is understandable, but it betrays a failure to comprehend the mystery of shadows. [...] Of course the Japanese room does have its picture alcove, and in it a hanging scroll and a flower arrangement. But the scroll and the flowers serve not as ornament but rather to give depth to the shadows. We value a scroll above all for the way it blends with the walls of the alcove,

and thus we consider the mounting quite as important as the calligraphy or painting. (*ibid.*, 18–19)

Stressing the importance of darkness and contrasts in terms of lights vs. shadows, with a sort of inversion of the usual western axiology relating the former to positive values and the latter to negative values, the author describes the effect arising from the combination of opaque lacquerware and the feeble lights of candles flickering in the dark as “a kind of silent music” stimulating reflection and enjoiment (cf. *ibid.*, 15). Such effect echoes the usual tendency to arrange small tables for 1, 2, 4, or in rare cases 6 people, disposed on two sides, when not individual covers the one close to the other, all oriented toward a central area where one or more cooks prepare the different plates, then allocating them on a bar or a conveyor belt that moves past every counter seat. More than talking to each other, eaters seem to be called to “communicate”—according to the etymology of the term, which comes from the Latin *commūnicāre*, “to share”—with food, to meditate on it. In this perspective, *transparency* constitutes a crucial element: cooks mix ingredients and prepare food just in front of the consumers, without any kind of barrier or with small glasses that, although separating the two areas, do not impede the look in both ways. This reinforces the essentially *visible* nature of Japanese cuisine, already mentioned when dealing with the symbolic dimension of *washoku*.¹⁸ as highlighted by Barthes, the Japanese plate represents a sort of painting or, better, palette (cf. 1970 [ET 1982], 11), whose pleasure is inextricably linked to the sight. The French semiotician stresses this issue introducing the idea of *rawness*:

It is an entire minor odyssey of food you are experiencing through your eyes: you are attending the Twilight of the Raw.

This Rawness, we know, is the tutelary divinity of Japanese food: to it everything is dedicated, and if Japanese cooking is always performed in front of the eventual diner (a fundamental feature of this cuisine), this is probably because it is important to consecrate by spectacle the death of what is being honored. What is being honored in what the French call *crudité* or rawness (a term we

¹⁸ Cf. §3.2.1.2.

use, oddly enough, in the singular to denote the sexuality of language and in the plural to name the external, abnormal, and somewhat taboo part of our menus) is apparently not, as with us, an inner essence of the foodstuff, the sanguinary plethora (blood being the symbol of strength and death) by which we assimilate vital energy by transmigration. [...] Japanese rawness is essentially visual; it denotes a certain colored state of the flesh or vegetable substance (it being understood that color is never exhausted by a catalogue of tints, but refers to a whole tactility of substance; thus *sashimi* exhibits not so much colors as resistances: those which vary the flesh of raw fish, causing it to pass, from one end of the tray to the other, through the stations of the soggy, the fibrous, the elastic, the compact, the rough, the slippery). (*ibid.* [ET 1982], 20–22)

The resulting tableau, according to Barthes, is characterised by the absence of a proper centre: in this chain of ornaments and exhibition of rawness and its “twilight”, the meal becomes an “uninterrupted text” (*ibid.*, 22) annihilating time, as it inscribes both the preparation and the consumption of food in a same temporal unit. The passage from Nature (the “raw”, cf. Lévi-Strauss 1964) to Culture (the “cooked”, or—better, in this case—the “elaborate”, cf. *ibid.*) itself is marked by *temporal continuity* as it is generally visibly accessible to customers, taking places before their eyes¹⁹. We will focus on the details of such issues in the following, after considering another essential element characterising not only the Japanese dining environment and food itself, but rather the entire Japanese semiosphere: *wrapping*. Before considering it, however, it should be said that, although food service in Japan has considerably changed over time, especially due to the processes of modernisation and westernisation following the Second World War, the contrasts between lights and shadows, the presence of flowers, floral motifs or other ornaments in the decoration of the dining room, as well as the practices of preparation, serving and consumption of food, and all the other mentioned elements still remain a

¹⁹ With the exception of the few practices of preparation that normally take place in another area, not visible to the eaters. We will deal with the details of this issue afterward, cf. §4.3.1.

central feature of *washoku*, according to which “tradition” should be carefully preserved and enhanced.²⁰

4.3 The Wrapping Culture

Another concept central to the Japanese semiosphere is the idea of *tsutsumi*, a term generally translated as *wrapping*. As mentioned in the dictionary, *to wrap* means “to fold or wind (paper, cloth, etc.) around (a person or thing) so as to cover” (Collins 2013), but also “to surround or conceal by surrounding” (*ibid.*), and the same Japanese logograph used to express this concept, 包, is quite descriptive, as it is formed of two lines enveloping one another (cf. Hendry 1993 [1995], 24). Moreover,

An interesting variation of this character is portrayed at the beginning of a videotape about Japanese wrapping, where the character suddenly becomes a mother holding a child. A colloquial word used by Japanese men in reference to their mothers can be literally translated as ‘bag’ (*fukuro*), although it usually carries an honorific *o* in front of it. This notion of mother as a kind of wrapping for her child, even after it is born and grown up, has in fact been shown by psychologist Yoko Yamada. (*ibid.*)

Wrapping, therefore, is primarily connected to concepts such as *containing* and *protecting*, in addition to the idea of *concealing* pointed out by the dictionary definition. To go further into the description of this notion, it is useful to refer to some anthropological analyses, such as the researches carried out by Geertz (1973; 1988), Clifford and Marcus (1986), Marcus and Fischer (1986), and, particularly, Joy Hendry (1993), according to whom the idea of wrapping can be attributed to different reasons:

²⁰ As its same definition remarks.

- Protecting goods from outside impurities (such as dirt or germs);
- Keeping the contents together for the purpose of transport or storage;
- Symbolising someone's status (as in the case of food products, gifts, etc.);
- Introducing an element of surprise (especially in the case of gifts);
- Giving people an opportunity to express their taste in the choice of paper, as well as their economic possibilities in its quality;
- Expressing care, for the object and therefore for the person to whom it is being presented (cf. also Uno 1985: 118-19; cf. Araki 1978: 20);
- Giving information about provenance (as in the case of souvenirs or food products);
- Expressing one's artistic capabilities.

However, it should not be forgotten that it is the case of a *semi-symbolic* system:²¹

All this interpretation is fine within its cultural context, but customs and understandings do not always find their parallels in other places where they are used. (Hendry 1993 [1995], 13–14)

Moreover, the concept of wrapping “is not limited to the function of packaging. It plays a central role in a wide variety of spiritual and cultural aspects of Japanese life” (Ekiguchi 1986, 6). In her book *Wrapping Culture*, Hendry considers different forms of wrapping, demonstrating their potential for communication within the Japanese culture, but also considering the danger of misunderstanding among different sociocultural systems. According to the Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at the Oxford Brookes University, wrapping characterises different spheres:

- The *presentation of self*, as Erving Goffman (1959) indirectly remarked, highlighting the different layers related to personal presentation through the “theatrical metaphor”. In Goffman's view, in social interaction, as in theatrical

²¹ Cf. Greimas and Courtés 1979, v. Semi-symbolique (système, langage, code –); Calabrese 1999.

performance, there is a front “stage” where people *act* in front of the audience (other people), trying to stimulate and enhance the positive aspects of their selves. There is also a backstage, a hidden or private place where individuals can get rid of their role in society, freely expressing themselves. The individuals’ main goal is to keep coherent, adjusting to the different settings where they find themselves. This is done mainly through interaction with other people, in a system where everyone is at the same time an actor and an audience for his viewers’ play.

- The packing and presentation of *gifts*, including both the way they are wrapped and the way they are unwrapped.
- The *body*, including clothes, ornaments, and any other aspect related to external presentation. Different scholars have focused on clothing considered as *prostheses of the skin* (cf. Volli 2000, 222), dealing with fashion as a system of meaning (cf. particularly Barthes 1967; Squicciarino 1986; Volli 1988; 1998; Calefato 1992; 1996; Barnard 1996). Michael O’Hanlon (1989) focuses more on bodily adornment, which represents another way of communicating information about the self, and reading information about others. Specifically, as regards Japanese bodily wrapping, reference should be made to the well-known *kimonos*, which,

Perhaps more than any other garments, are literally ‘wrapped’ around the body, sometimes in several layers, like the gifts, and [...] are secured in place by sashes, with a wide *obi* to complete the human parcel. The *obi* itself secured with complicated ties, the precise form depending on the occasion, but the final effect intended to offer an aesthetically pleasing overall image to the observer, just as is the *mizuhiki* which secures gifts. (Hendry 1993 [1995], 73-74)

Stressing the relation between clothes, language, and social status, Hendry also considers the *jūnihitoe*, literally meaning “twelve layers”, which is a garment that could be composed of up to twenty distinct kimonos,

Each chosen carefully to create together an aesthetically pleasing combination of colour contrasts at the neck and sleeve (see e.g. Dalby, 1988). The wearer of such a garment had very little freedom of movement, and she would sometimes be further obscured by being obliged to remain behind a screen during conversation (whence only her sleeves might be visible), but she would grandly symbolize the wealth and status of the courtly company of which she was part”.
(*ibid.*,75)

Far beyond just covering the body, clothing, uniforms, tattoos, and other ornaments represent its symbolic prostheses, whose meanings are inextricably linked to the practice of wrapping and unwrapping.

- The *language*, from personal interactions to politics, from honorifics to respect language. Particularly, the Japanese refer to the latter as *keigo* (敬語), a term including different subcategories: *sonkeigo* (尊敬語), corresponding to a more literal translation of “respect language”, which raises the level of an addressee; *kenjōgo* (謙讓語), or “humble language”, lowering instead the level of the speaker; and *teineigo* (丁寧語), usually translated as “polite language”, elevating the general level of the speech altogether and expressing respect and distance. In addition to these forms, which have been analysed in more general terms and with respect to different semiospheres also by the sociologist Erving Goffman (1959, 127–133), we should not forget ritual formulas, as well as the importance of the sociocultural background in which conversation take place.
- The “temporal wrapping”, that is, “how time is divided up, the way in which events are separated off from other events, and with the structuring, in time, of those events themselves” (Hendry 1993 [1995], 142). This is particularly

important within the Japanese context, where strong emphasis is put on beginnings and endings, as well as on the ordering of meetings, drinking sessions (cf. Moeran 1984), and other important events.

- Finally, also at a *spatial* level, wrapping reflects degrees of distance and formality, as well as the hierarchical structure of people (cf. Hendry 1993 [1995], 99). Again, this is particularly evident in Japan, where typical houses are designed as to be penetrated to different degrees: from the porch, the most accessible layer that may be entered with very little ceremony by anyone who calls at the door, visitors pass through a *tatami* matted room, the *ozen* (the “front room”, where mundane business are generally managed), and, depending on the structure of the house, other rooms, until reaching the *oku* of the house, its “heart” or “interior”. As the visitor moves toward the inner part of the building, the rituals that must be observed, the intimacy he or she has with the householder, as well as the clothes (especially the footwear)²² and the language used, change.

The house is designed in such a way that the inner areas appear quite distant from the outer ones, and the sliding doors appear to wrap the inner areas and protect them from the outside. Just as with language, layers of polite formality conceal (and occasionally reveal) an inner sanctum, and the nearer the outside one finds oneself, the more formal is the expected behaviour. The same applies to the formality of garments, the food consumed, and the gifts exchanged.
(*ibid.*,100)

Such structure, whose principles remain valid also in the case of castles, palaces, temples, and public buildings—although in a more elaborate form and with possible variations—, is further enhanced by the presence of outside gardens, constructed to add extra layers symbolising protection, distance, or formality, and by the visual

²² Generally removed after the porch, sometimes substituting shoes with slippers, which in turn have to be removed when accessing the inner rooms.

illusions created by the combination of paper screens and sliding doors. According to Tetsuro Yoshida, the *shōji* (translucent paper made by modern manufacturing processes) and the *washi* (the white, traditional paper) used for these screens “in order to achieve a subdued light, a warm surface effect and good heat-insulation” (1955, 158) help keeping the typical harmonious atmosphere of the Japanese room, creating at the same time the previously mentioned oppositions in terms of lights and shadows and significant partitions of space. Finally, in the case of shops and buildings, it is common to find another typical separator: the *noren*. This fabric divider, generally located at the entrance of the building, between rooms, on walls, in doorways, or in windows, usually boldly reports the name—and/or the logo—of the establishment, and has a strong symbolic value for their keepers, particularly in communities which like to preserve a traditional Japanese atmosphere (Koizumi 1985, 5-25). Moreover, exterior *noren* are commonly used by shops and restaurants as a means of protection from sun, wind, or dust, while interior *noren* separate dining areas from kitchen or other preparation areas, also preventing smoke or smells from escaping.

4.3.1 *Washoku* through the Lens of Wrapping

As mentioned above, wrapping can be related to different functions, such as containing, concealing, taking care of, respecting specific forms of rituality, expressing distance, social status, or formality, etc. Moreover, it concerns different spheres, from packing to space, from body to time, from language to objects. Building on these observations, as well as on what stated in the previous paragraph about *washoku*, it seems possible and extremely useful to analyse the Japanese eating experience through the lens of the “wrapping principle” (Hendry 1993). Particularly, as regards the presentation of food, we made reference to the visual nature of Japanese cuisine, according to which the plate itself, with its typical geometries and chromatic and topological oppositions, can be described—to use Barthes’s terms (1970)—as a painting or, rather, a palette. Not only Japanese food is “entirely visual (conceived, concerted, manipulated for sight, and even for a

painter's eye" (*ibid.* [ET 1983], 22), but the same practice of preparation of food has a *graphic* character:

He [the cook] prepares our food in front of us, conducting, from gesture to gesture, from place to place, the eel from the breeding pond to the white paper, [...] not (only) in order to make us witnesses to the extreme precision and purity of his cuisine; it is because his activity is literally graphic: he inscribes the foodstuff in the substance; his stall is arranged like a calligrapher's table; he touches the substances like the graphic artist (especially if he is Japanese) who alternates pots, brushes, inkstone, water, paper; he thereby accomplishes, in the racket of the restaurant and the chaos of shouted orders, a hierarchized arrangement, not of time but of tenses (those of a grammar of *tempura*), makes visible the entire gamut of practices, recites the foodstuff not as a finished merchandise, whose perfection alone would have value (as is the case with our dishes), but as a product whose meaning is not final but progressive, exhausted, so to speak, when its production has ended: it is you who eat, but it is he who has played, who has written, who has produced". (*ibid.*, 26)

Moreover, the same Japanese dishes are often characterised by a "wrapping structure": some ingredients, such as seaweed, other vegetables, fish, or the same rice, are used to "enclose" other ingredients, such as in the case of sushi—as we will analyse more in depth in the following paragraphs.²³ The result is a creation of a configuration that could be described in terms of *enclosing–enclosed*, *external–internal*, or *containing–contained*, and that can be repeated several times. This effect is then echoed at the level of practices, with the chopsticks never piercing or cutting food, but rather delicately "enclosing" it, or simply diving it according to its natural interstices. Even with respect to the dining environment, the visual

²³ Cf. §4.5.3.

element is crucial: specific tricks of lights and shadows, the use of a particular lighting, and the traditional presence of *noren* or other draperies, windows, sliding doors, and screens made of wood, bamboo, and rice paper contribute to create a particular configuration, whose effects are usually reiterated by the same elements of the tableware.

Building on these observations, at a more general level, it becomes evident the essential role played in *washoku* by sight, and particularly by specific dynamics related to the opposition *to show vs. to conceal*.

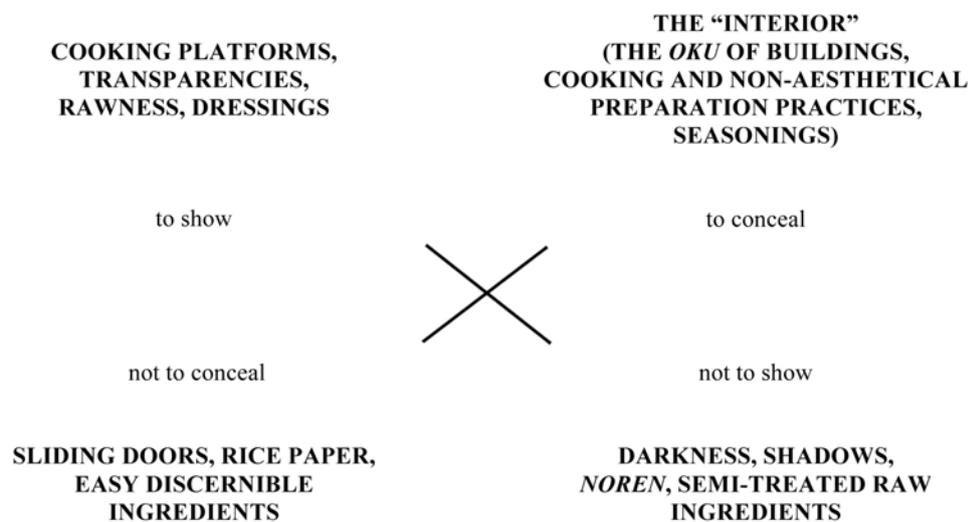


Figure 10 – Semiotic square for the visual analysis of *washoku*.

If cooking platforms and transparencies—on the spatial side—, and rawness—for what concerns food—seem to respond to the intention *to show* (the ingredients, the practices underlying their preparation, etc.), the “heart” or “interior” is always *concealed* at both levels. As the *oku* of buildings is wrapped by the outer layers concealing it from the outside, cooking procedures and non-aesthetical food preparation practices—such as skinning fish, peeling vegetables, preparing rice, discarding entrails, etc.—usually take place in spaces inaccessible to the consumers. It is also very interesting to notice how condiments can be either showed—as in the case of soy sauce, *gari* (marinated ginger), sometimes *wasabi*,

or other dressings or spices accompanying food—or concealed—as in the case of the vinegar used to prepare the rice for sushi, or the same wasabi, when it is directly put between the fish and the rice.²⁴ With respect to the contradiction terms, darkness, shadows, *noren*, and other divisors—on the spatial side—, and semi-treated raw ingredients (whose cooking and non-aesthetical preparation practices are generally concealed)—in relation to food—seem to be related to the logic of *not showing*, whereas sliding doors, the semi-*opacity*—or rather semi-*transparency*—created by rice papers, and the realisation of plates where each ingredient is usually easily discernable from the other ones respond to the intention of *not concealing*.

Such configuration stresses the fluid and inclusive nature of *washoku*, its *semi-openness*: draperies that separate different areas without completely closing them, semi-transparent dividing screens and sliding doors separating different rooms but at the same time breaking the discontinuity typical of common doors or walls, as well as cooking platforms allowing consumers to assist to most preparation practices, and even the same configuration of plates—which usually make it possible to distinguish the different ingredients in their syntagmatic chains—oppose to the typical Western eating experience, traditionally more characterised by concealing, although with increasing exceptions. On the other hand, the perceptive and cognitive appropriation—of space, but also of all the other dimensions associated with *washoku*—by the eater is somehow limited by a series of *layers*—darkness, divisors, and not-shown practices or ingredients—, according to a *wrapped* structure recurring at different levels. But division and concealing are never complete: showing the passage from Nature to Culture, food preparation is mostly visible to the consumers, with the exception of a few practices; more than impeding the sight, shadows and darkness create a sort of sacredness of the esoteric, of what is not immediately shown or revealed, but must be progressively acquired;²⁵ just partially preventing the look, draperies, sliding doors, and semi-

²⁴ Cf. §4.5.3.

²⁵ Echoing the process of production of food, which, as Barthes states, is “a product whose meaning is not final but progressive” ([ET 1983], 26).

opaque screens rather seem to exalt visibility, intensifying it but at the same time structuring it according to a system of *gradual* accessibility.²⁶

This has important consequences with respect to the definition of roles within the eating experience, as well as in relation to the description of objectivised discursive spatiality. If the eater is called to look at food and its preparation practices, so that it seems that he *has to do it*²⁷ (prescription), he *is* just partially *able to do it* (impossibility – possibility), depending on his *competence*, which consists in the position he finds himself in, as well as other variables that will be taken into consideration when analysing the different case studies, and which may vary during the development of the same eating experience. In many cases Japanese restaurants abroad are structured in different areas—sushi bar, common tables, patio, etc.—where different services are offered. We will deal with the implications of the spatial configuration of the restaurant and the possibility to move within the various rooms in the following. Here it is sufficient to notice that, in any case, Japanese restaurants—more than other food services—are generally characterised by the presence of a waiting or entrance room, where consumers are welcomed and often asked to get “unwrapped” of their overcoat and/or shoes before proceeding to the dining room(s). Normally, therefore, there is a *heterotopical* space²⁸ where unwrapping begins, thus allowing the consumer to

²⁶ With the exceptions of those previously mentioned spaces and practices that are usually concealed.

²⁷ Cf. Greimas and Courtés 1979; Greimas 1970; 1983a.

²⁸ “The description of objectivized discursive spatiality can be conceived of as a topological distribution, in conformity with the definition of narrative itself and parallel in its unfolding. If we keep to the definition of the narrative as a logical transformation situated between two stable narrative states, we can consider the place where the transformation in question takes place as a *topical space*, and the preceding and following places enclosing it as *heterotopical spaces*. [...] Yet, a sub-articulation of the topical space often appears necessary. By precisely delimiting a *utopian space*, a fundamental space where man’s *doing* can triumph over the permanence of *being*, the descriptor leaves the way open to differentiating *paratopical spaces* which are the settings for the preparatory or qualifying tests, sorts of mediating places between the poles of spatial categorization. Granted the above, the articulation of uttered space appears as the objectivizing projection of the ensemble of spatial deices, originally linked to the temporal instance of enunciation:

young, green ears of rice, recalling the importance of this ingredient for the cooking of the “Land of the Rising Sun”:

Japanese have always eaten rice, and Japan’s culture of rice cultivation is thought to have begun around three thousand years ago during the Jomon era (10,000-300 BC). With its large amount of rainfall—double the global average—and hot summer season, Japan’s climate is well suited to rice cultivation. As in the days of old, Japan is still a land of rice, and it is not exaggeration to say that rice is *washoku*’s foundation. The primary food sources for Japanese before rice cultivation began were cereals such as foxtail millet, proso millet, barley, and buckwheat. Even after rice cultivation commenced, field crops and grains were grown in mountainous and other areas in upper altitudes without easy access to water. Only very recently have Japanese come to depend on rice alone as their staple foodstuff. Looking back through history, there were many times when the primary diet here mainly consisted of rice cooked with various grains. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2012, 6–7)

While rice has a long history of cultivation in Japan, its use as a staple is recent: especially in northern areas (northern Honshū and Hokkaidō), other grains—such as wheat—were more common until the 19th century (cf. Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 12–29). Nevertheless, a first evidence of its fundamental relevance for Japanese can be found in the use of the same word, *meshi* (*gohan* in the polite form), to refer either to cooked rice or the “meal” in general, as remarked also by Roland Barthes in *L’Empire des Signes*:

Cooked rice (whose absolutely special identity is attested to by a special name, which is not that of raw rice) can be defined only by a contradiction of substance; it is at once

cohesive and detachable; its substantial destination is the fragment, the clump, the volatile conglomerate; it is the only element of weight in all of Japanese alimentation (antinomic to the Chinese); it is what sinks, in opposition to what floats; it constitutes in the picture a compact whiteness, granular (contrary to that of our bread) and yet friable. (1970 [ET 1983], 12)

According to the anthropologist Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (1993), moreover, “no other historical event was as significant for the development of what is now known as the Japanese nation” (30). Around 350 B.C. wet-rice agriculture was introduced to Japan from an indeterminate place in Asia via the Korean Peninsula to Kyūshū (in the southern part of Japan), from where it spread northeastward in three successive waves, finally reaching the Tōhoku region (northeast) by the beginning of the Christian era (Kokuritsu Rekishi Minzoku Hakubutsukan 1987 [1985], 14). It has then become more and more common, finally coming to represent the staple of Japanese diet:

In addition to greater yields from improved varieties and technology, two major events made rice available as daily food for a greater number of Japanese. First, the military draft (*chōhei*) adopted by the Meiji government provided rice daily for soldiers from areas that relied on miscellaneous grains (*zakkoku*) and, therefore, had not eaten rice as an everyday food. Obviously, this policy affected not only the male population [...]. Second, the 1942 Food Control Act (Shokuryō Kanrihō), which regulated food provision and the rationing system (*haikyū*), brought rice to islands and remote regions where only miscellaneous grains were grown (Tsuboi 1984, 68).

Watanabe (1989, 83) claims that most Japanese began to eat rice as a staple food in 1939 when food rationing was adopted. He also believes that 90 percent of the population

during the Early Modern Period (1603-1868) daily ate some rice and that 80 percent ate it three times a day; the remaining 20 percent of the people ate rice about half of the time, and a very small number of Japanese ate rice only occasionally. In Dore's opinion, by the 1930s, 'white rice had come to be considered a part of the birthright of every Japanese' ([1958] 1973, 58–59). Other scholars claim that in northeastern Japan, most people, except warriors and upperclass merchants, ate only millet (*awa*, *hie*) until the 1960s (e.g., Itoh, personal communication, 1990; Obayashi 1973, 5–6). (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 39–40)

Despite these controversies, there is no doubt that rice—which is short grain, mostly *hakumaki* (“white rice”, with the outer part of the grains (*nuka*) polished away), but also *genmai* (unpolished “brown rice”, generally considered less tasty, even if it is healthier than *hakumaki*)—constitutes the staple of nowadays Japanese cuisine, where it is indissolubly tied to specific meanings and values, which will be discussed in the following paragraph.

4.4.2 Rice as a “Self”

Although rice has not always been quantitatively important to Japan and *washoku* for a long time, it represents the most important metaphor of the Japanese self:

As a people, Japanese have repeatedly reconceptualised themselves as they encountered different others—Chinese and Westerners—by using rice as a metaphor for themselves. (Ohnuki-Tierney, 4)

In her book *Rice as Self*, Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney analyses how, throughout time, the symbolic importance of rice has been deeply embedded in the Japanese cosmology. Building on Yanagita's idea (1982, 159–160) that rice is the only grain believed to have a soul, the scholar analyses Japanese cosmogony myths and ancient rituals to point out how rice is assigned a special significance within such values systems (Ohnuki-Tierney, 44–62), then exploring the Japanese concepts of wealth and the related notions of power (rice as a sacred tax and sacred currency) and aesthetics (rice as beauty, good life, and sacred gift) associated with rice (*ibid.*, 63–80). Such representations have progressively penetrated the everyday life of the Japanese, extending beyond the agrarian cosmology and reaching the cultural and social sphere, where “rice and rice paddies have come to represent the collective self of a social group within Japanese society from the smallest unit, of a family, to Japan as a whole” (*ibid.*, 99). It is interesting, moreover, to consider the symbolic dimension associated with the opposition between rice and other foods: while the contrast between “domestic rice grown on Japanese soil” (*naichimai*) and “foreign rice” (*gaimai*) recalls the differences between Japanese and other Asians, the opposition between rice and meat—or, later, the California rice introduced in the post-industrial era, which although being very similar to the domestic one and cheaper than it, was strenuously resisted by the Japanese—is a metaphor of the distinction between the Self and the Other—that is, Westerners. “Multivocal or polysemic” (*ibid.*, 128) symbol, rice has embodied different values over time, opposing nature to culture, tradition to modernisation, authenticity to transgression, deity to humanity, and so on, but always representing a key element for the Japanese Self and its changing representations (cf. also Toussaint-Samat 1987, 189–190).

4.5 Focusing on *Sushi*: Configurative, Taxic, and Functional Analysis

According to the Western *imaginarium*, *sushi* is undoubtedly the most representative element of Japanese cuisine. Often overlooking other elements typical of *washoku*, many Japanese restaurants abroad propose menus basically centred on this food, which, although certainly being emblematic of the Japanese foodsphere, is not its only constituent, and—which is even more important—is frequently subjected to re-semanticisation processes that “translate” it according to the rules underlying the foodsphere where it is prepared in. It is essential, therefore, to focus first of all on a synthetic but complete analysis of *sushi*, embracing both the material and the semantic level.

4.5.1 What is *Sushi*?

Mentioned for the first time in a Chinese dictionary hypothetically dating back to the 4th century, *sushi* has no certain origins. There is no evidence of its actual invention, but it is thought that it was introduced in Japan in the 9th century (Mouritsen 2009, 15). Originally, it represented a culinary technique for long-term preservation:

Sushi has its roots in what is called *narezushi*—fermented *sushi* produced by mixing fish with rice and salt and letting the mixture cure through the action of lactobacillus. Today’s style of placing seafood on top of rice, called *nigirizushi*, first appeared in the Bunsei period (1818-1830). *Sushi*, an easy meal of fresh fish and rice, quickly became popular as a fast food item sold at street stalls”. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2012, 9)

In *narezushi*,³⁰ fish fermentation was stimulated via wrapping it in soured fermenting rice, so that the fermenting rice and fish resulted in a sour taste—which explains the name *sushi*, literally meaning “sour-tasting”. Traditionally, when the fermented fish was taken out of the rice, only the fish was eaten, while the fermented rice was discarded (cf. Itou *et al*, 2006). This traditional form has progressively changed over time, with respect to different aspects:

In the mid-1700’s, the fermentation period was shortened to just a couple of hours with the introduction of *hako-zushi*, still made as a special form of sushi. Because it is prepared so quickly, it does not really involve fermentation *per se*. *Hako-zushi* is prepared by placing a layer of vinegar cooked rice together with filleted fish in a small wooden box which compresses the rice. To serve, the resulting box of fish and rice is cut into slices. Tradition has it that in the 1820’s Hanaya Yohei (1799-1858) from Edo invented or elaborated the modern form of sushi, which is called *nigiri-sushi*. It consists of a simple ball of rice, shaped by hand, with a piece of fish placed on top of it. The rice used is freshly cooked, after which rice vinegar and salt are added, this can be considered ‘speed fermentation’ of only a few minutes duration. The fish is completely fresh and does not have time to be preserved by contact with the vinegared rice and, in contrast to the original *nare-zushi*, both fish and rice are eaten immediately after preparation. [...] In this way, sushi was transformed into an early version of fast food. (Mouritsen 2009, 16)

³⁰ In spelling “sushi”, the first *s* is replaced with *z* when a prefix is attached, due to *rendaku*, which is the Japanese consonant mutation of the non-initial portion of a compound or prefixed.

The reduction—and almost elimination—of the process of fermentation³¹ (cf. also Zschock 2005), the different shapes, and the new practices of preparation and consumption have profoundly changed the semantic sphere of sushi, intervening on semantic oppositions such as raw vs. cooked—or, rather, elaborate—, Nature vs. Culture, and fresh vs. fermented, and even separateness from vs. conjunction with other ingredients. This stresses the oxymoronic nature of sushi, which is at the same time “simple” and “complex”, as stated by the famous Japanese food writer Masuhiro Yamamoto with respect to what he defines the best sushi he has ever had, the one prepared by the Michelin award winning Japanese chef Jiro Ono: “All of the sushi is simple, it’s completely minimalist. Master chefs from around the world eat at Jiro’s and say, ‘How can something so simple has so much depth in flavor? If you were to sum up Jiro’s sushi in a nutshell, ‘Ultimately simplicity leads to purity’” (cf. Gelb 2011, 4’ 10” – 4’ 29”). Simple as regards its basic ingredients, sushi is instead characterised by density and complexity for what concerns flavours. Moreover, although the progressive simplification of its practices of preparation has caused its repositioning along the axes of the culinary triangle (cf. Fig. 1) proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1964; 1965)—reducing its proximity to the rotten (due to the processes of fermentation and boiling) and pushing it forward toward the vertex of the raw—, sushi is neither coinciding with the “unelaborate” nor easy to prepare, requiring extensive expertise and particular technical skills. This contributes to stress its controversial nature, which make it impossible to efficaciously analyse it according to a purely dualistic logic, requiring a more dynamic and transformational approach.³² Finally, even

³¹ Still present just in a few forms of sushi, nowadays not very common, such as *narezushi* (熟れ寿司, “matured sushi”), in which skinned and gutted fish are stuffed with salt, placed in a wooden container, immersed in salt again, and finally weighed down with a heavy *tsukemonishi* (pickling stone). After six months, during which the water seeping out should be constantly removed, sushi can be eaten, remaining edible for another six months or more. The most famous type of *narezushi* still produced is *funazushi*, which is a typical dish of Shiga Prefecture.

³² On closer inspection, even Roland Barthes (1970) stresses this double dimension when he states that although “it is you who eat” (26), who experience that “Twilight of the Raw” which is the “tutelary divinity” of sushi and, more generally, of Japanese food (20), on the other hand, it is the cook who play[s], who write[s], who produce[s]” (26) meanings intervening in the transition from Nature to Culture.

considering *umami*, the “pleasant savoury taste” particularly valorised in Japanese cuisine, a *tensive* model (cf. Fontanille 2003, 69–73 and 109–116; Fontanille and Zilberberg 1999) would seem more appropriate to examine sushi with respect to the taste dimension, according to the two “valencies” of intensity and extent, and the idea of “balance” mentioned in the previous. Albeit the centrality of values such as simplicity, purity, and naturality, sushi assumes interesting complex and changeable configurations which will be further analysed in the following, when taking into consideration the main types of sushi.

4.5.2 Types of Sushi

Although the common ingredient of all kinds of sushi is cooked vinegared rice, a great variety of fillings, toppings, condiments, and preparation practices make it possible to distinguish various types of sushi, which can be even very different the one from the other. Before considering the most common typologies,³³ however, it is important to point out that the main principle in every form of sushi is the combination of vinegared cooked rice either with some ingredients placed on top (*tane*, *neta*) or with a filling (*gu*). The same ingredients, moreover, can play a role both as *tane* and as *gu*, depending on the type of sushi (cf. Mouritsen 2009, 19). There are four classical types of *tane*: *akami* are red or dark ingredients, such as tuna or salmon; *shiromi*, like flatfish with white muscle flesh, are white; *hikari-mono*, like unskinned mackerel and herring, are shiny; *nimono-dane* are cooked or simmered ingredients, such as octopus, eel, or bivalves. *Hokonanomono* include instead more categories, as in the case of shrimps, roes, or sea urchins. On the other hand, *gu* is the designation for everything other than rice in rolled sushi (*tofu*, *omelette*, fish, vegetables, sesame seeds, etc.), without any further

³³ On the base of different sources and, particularly: Detrick 1981; Hosking 1995; Ashkenazi, M. and J. Jacob 2000; Barber 2002; Dekura, H., B. Treloar and R. Yoshii 2004; Lowry 2005; Mouritsen 2009; Zschock 2009; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2012. Special thanks also go to Masayoshi Yshida (Slow Food Japan), Kenji Ozawa (Tokyo), and the cook and journalist Sayaka Miyamoto.

subclassification. Before being used, some kinds of *tane* and *gu* should be appropriately prepared—either by cooking, salting, marinating, or simmering them—to make them edible or change their flavour, while some others can be consumed raw, sometimes after having frozen them (*ibid.*).

4.5.2.1 Makizushi

Makizushi (巻き寿司, literally “rolled sushi”) is made of a cylindrical section of rice, formed with the help of a *masiku* (bamboo mat), generally wrapped in *nori* (seaweed) and occasionally wrapped in a thin *omelette*, soy paper, cucumber, or *shiso* leaves. The resulting roll is then usually cut into six or eight pieces, which can assume different forms:

- *Futomaki* (太巻, “thick, large, or fat rolls”) is a large (2-2.5 in / 5-6 cm in diameter) cylindrical piece, wrapped in *nori*, often made with two, three, or more fillings chosen for their complementary tastes and colours.



Figure 11 – Futomaki (© Mouritsen 2009, 22).

- *Hosomaki* (細巻, “thin rolls”) is a small (0.8-1 in / 2-2.5 cm in diameter) cylindrical piece, with the *nori* on the outside, generally containing only one filling (cucumber—*Kappamaki*—, raw tuna—*Tekkamaki*—, *kanpyō*,

avocado, or sliced carrots or cucumber).



Figure 12 – Hosomaki (© Mouritsen 2009, 22).

- *Temaki* (手巻, “hand roll”) is a large cone-shaped piece of *nori* wrapping some ingredients spilling out its wide end. Not to lose the crispiness of the seaweed, it is generally eaten quickly after its preparation. Moreover, it is commonly eaten with fingers because it is too uncomfortable to pick it up with chopsticks.



Figure 13 – Temaki (© Mouritsen 2009, 23).

- *Uramaki* (裏巻, “inside-out roll”) is a medium-sized cylindrical piece with two or more fillings, differing from other *makizushi* because here the rice is on the outside—generally in turn surrounded by a layer of roe, toasted sesame seeds, or other ingredients—and the *nori* inside, wrapping the centre—which can be made of different fillings, such as

tuna, salmon, crab meat, avocado, cucumber, or carrots.



Figure 14 – Uramaki (© Mouritsen 2009, 22).

4.5.2.2 Nigirizushi

Nigirizushi (握り寿司, “hand-pressed sushi”) is made of an oblong mound of *sushi rice* pressed into a small rectangular box held between the palms of the hands, usually with a bit of *wasabi*, and a *neta* (a topping consisting of salmon, tuna, or other fish or seafood) draped over it. Toppings can also be bound to the rice with a thin strip of *nori*, as in the case of *tako* (octopus), *unagi* (freshwater eel), *anago* (sea eel), *ika* (squid), and *tamago* (sweet egg).



Figure 15 – *Nigirizushis* – salmon (left) and octopus (right)
(© Mouritsen 2009, 22).

4.5.2.3 Oshizushi

Oshizushi (押し寿司, “pressed sushi”), also known as *hakozushi* (箱寿司, “box sushi”), a specialty of Osaka and the Kansai region, is a block-shaped piece formed using a wooden mold, called *oshibako*. After lining the bottom of the mold with the toppings, the chef covers them with sushi rice (and, eventually, other ingredients, such as avocado in Fig. 16), and then presses the lid of the mold down in order to create a rectilinear block, which is then removed from the *oshibako* and cut into bite-sized pieces.



Figure 16 – Oshizushi (© Mouritsen 2009, 23).

4.5.2.4 Chirashizushi

Chirashizushi or *chirashi* sushi (ちらし寿司, “scattered sushi”) is a bowl of sushi rice topped with a variety of sashimi (a variety of fresh raw fish sliced into thin pieces) and garnishes. *Chirashizushi* often varies regionally and the ingredients can be either chef’s choice or specified by the customers. *Edomae chirashizushi* (Edo-style scattered sushi) consists in only one uncooked ingredient arranged on top of the sushi rice in a bowl; in

gomokuzushi (Kansai-style sushi), by contrast, cooked and/or uncooked ingredients are mixed in the body of rice in a bowl.



Figure 17 – Chirashizushi (© Mouritsen 2009, 23).

4.5.2.5 Western-style Sushi: the California Roll

The increasing popularity of sushi around the world and the multiple intersections among different foodspheres have resulted in the appearance of numerous variations of “Western-style sushi”, which are rarely found in Japan.³⁴ The most known example of such a phenomenon is the so-called *California Roll*, a *makizushi* containing cucumber, crab meat or *kani kama* (imitation crab),³⁵ and avocado.³⁶ In the 1960-70s California became one of the main havens for emigrating Japanese chefs, who gave rise to different sushi bars. In one of them, the *Tokyo Kaikan* restaurant, Ichiro Mashita

³⁴ It makes exception the use of salmon, introduced by the Norwegians in the early 1980s.

³⁵ Also known as *crabsticks* or simply *krab*, it is a form of *kamaboko*, which is a processed seafood made of finely minced *surimi* (white fish flesh), shaped to resemble leg meat of crabs. Sometimes, flakes are used instead of sticks to resemble crab or lobster meat, thus turning crabstick into *crab flakes*.

³⁶ Either mango or banana are sometimes used instead of avocado.

began substituting avocado for *toro* (fatty tuna) to suit the American taste, thus creating the California roll. Soon become popular all across California and the United States, this roll has developed into multiple variations. One of the most significant adaptations is represented by the choice of making it *uramaki*, with *nori* on the inside—again, to suit the local taste—and rice on the outside, in its turn covered by a layer of sesame seeds or *tobiko* (flying fish roe). Finally, another widespread Western-style sushi is the *Alaska Roll*, a variant of the previously mentioned California roll with raw salmon on the inside or layered on the outside.



Figure 18 – California Roll (© Mourtisen 2009, 18).



Figure 19 – Alaska Roll (© Musashi 2012).

4.5.3 Sushi through the Lens of Semiotics

Building on the descriptions provided above, we can try to analyse sushi through the lens of the semiotic approach. In addition to what highlighted before, it should be said that, in relation to the *configuration* dimension, the main ingredients composing sushi could be divided into rice, (raw or cooked) fish, (dehydrated) *nori*, fresh vegetables (such as avocado, cucumber, or carrots), seeds, eggs, and condiments, as regards their nature, and into two groups—with the *outside* elements *wrapping* the *inside* ones, which are on the contrary *wrapped*—with respect to their position and function. This leads to interesting observations in terms of semantic oppositions: first of all, *humid* ingredients, such as fresh vegetables, fish, roe, or condiments, oppose to *dry* elements, such as *nori* or dried seeds, with the rice occupying an intermediate position between these two poles. The liquids³⁷ used during the process of boiling, in fact, permeate the previously dried grains (the “natural” rice, as Lévi-Strauss would say), which assimilate them, thus making the “culturalised” rice move toward the pole of *humid*. On the other hand, the particular practices of preparation of sushi rice and the use of sugar and other substances ensure a certain degree of cohesion among the cooked grains, which are not used and eaten for separate, but pressed together to form wider unities where they tend not to be clearly discernable or too easily separable from the others. In this way, at a semantic level, the grains of rice lose importance *per se*, moving the focus of attention to the solidity of the whole piece they become part of—which, compared to the fish and other ingredients such as fresh vegetables or roe, cannot be considered humid, but should be rather placed on the *continuum* between the two poles (cf. Fig. 20).

³⁷ Generally water and soy vinegar.

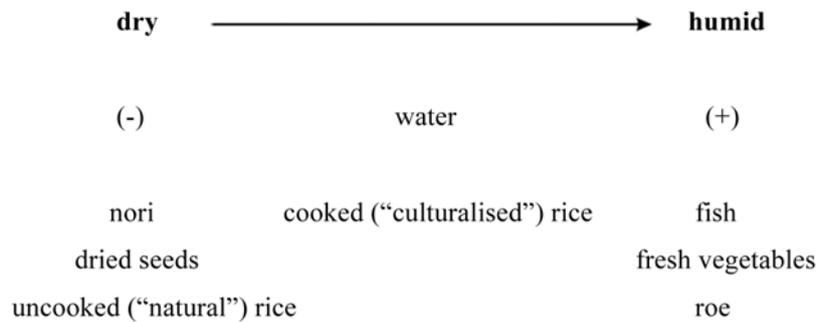


Figure 20 – Dry and humid elements of sushi.

Moreover, the “culturalised” rice—to continue using a Lévi-Straussian terminology—share another important characteristic with one of the principal dry ingredients of sushi: *nori*. If the latter allows consumers to hold *makizushis* within the chopsticks—or *temakis* within the fingers—, preventing their breakage or decomposition (*functional* dimension), the former has the same function in *nigirizushis*, whose rice grains are glued the one to the other thanks to the sugar and other substances used in or resulting from the process of boiling,³⁸ thus forming compact small pieces surmounted by different ingredients that eaters can take using the chopsticks—or their hands.

Such an opposition contributes to highlight another—already mentioned—contrast: the progressive simplification of the practices of preparation of sushi has reduced its proximity to the rotten (due to the processes of fermentation and boiling), which is the *natural* transformation of the raw, pushing it forward toward the vertex of the raw itself (which, in the culinary triangle by Lévi Strauss represents Nature). On the other hand, as analysed in the previous, sushi does not coincide with the “unelaborate”, being marked by different “cultural” processes that require extensive expertise and particular technical skills. Again, therefore, its controversial nature becomes evident, making it impossible to efficaciously

³⁸ E.g. the starch, partially eliminated by the common practice of washing rice before cooking it, but still present.

analyse the most representative element of *washoku* according to a purely dualistic logic.

Rawness embodies *the* natural flavour of any foodstuff. Thus raw fish is the true essence of fish. Paradoxically, to get to this “natural” flavour, one must exercise the highest possible *human* discrimination and skill. [...] The “true” or “natural” flavour of a fish (or meat, or fruit) becomes evident only through human intervention. (Ashkenazi 2000, 86)

Moreover, the same process of fermentation characterising sushi—though with temporal and technical differences among the different typologies, which in many cases tend to reduce such process to a minimum, almost making it disappear—, is not easily ascribable to one of the poles of the opposition Nature *vs.* Culture. If it is true that the rotten represents the natural transformation of the raw (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1964; 1965), it should not be forgotten that such a process is carefully controlled and mastered by cooks, requiring particular skills that oscillate between “natural” talent, on the one hand, and “culturally” honed know-how and unceasing practice,³⁹ on the other hand.

As regards the structure of sushi, we distinguished two types of components: *external* elements *wrap* the *internal* ones, which are on the contrary *wrapped* by the outside ones. In relation to such oppositions (wrapping *vs.* wrapped and outside *vs.* inside), ingredients are characterised by *interchangeability*, as the same element could correspond either to one pole or another depending on the type of sushi. In the case of *futomakis*, *hosomakis*, or *temakis* (Fig. 21), for example, *nori* is the external element wrapping both rice—in an intermediate position, at the same time wrapped (by *nori*) and wrapping (fresh vegetables and fish)—and other ingredients placed at the centre of sushi.

³⁹ With this respect, it is very interesting to take into consideration the—already mentioned—movie *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (Gelb 2011), where the tension between natural talent and expertise gained through constant practice and strong commitment represents a crucial issue.

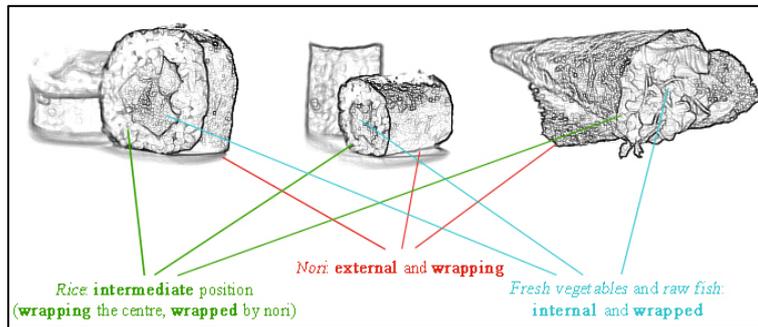


Figure 21 – Wrapping and wrapped elements in (from left to right) *futomaki*, *hosomaki*, and *temaki*.

By contrast, in *uramakis* (Fig. 22), *nori* finds itself in an intermediate position, with fish and vegetables on the inside—wrapped by it—and rice on the outside—wrapping it. A second layer of seeds or roe then reinforces this wrapping structure, enclosing the whole piece.

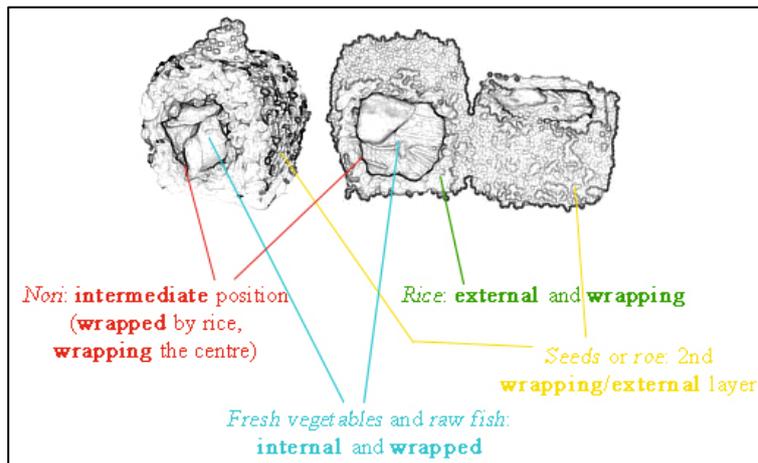


Figure 22 – Wrapping and wrapped elements in *uramaki*.

It is essential to remark that the only element never changing its position or function despite the different configuration of sushi is its centre, made of raw fish and fresh vegetables. This has important implication on the oppositions analysed above: dry *vs.* humid, on the one hand; and Nature *vs.* Culture, on the other hand. Both in the examples depicted in Fig. 21 and in the case of *uramaki* (Fig. 22) such

contrasts are characterised by *gradualness*: if in *futomoakis*, *hosomakis*, and *temakis* the “culturalised” rice mediates between the humidness of raw fish and fresh vegetables in the inside and the dryness of the seaweed on the outside, in the more elaborate structure of *uramakis* the intermediation element becomes the “culturalised” *nori*,⁴⁰ which, put between the fish/vegetables and the cooked—and therefore partially humid—rice, absorbs part of their water, abandoning its dry nature to get closer to the vertex of humidness⁴¹ (cf. Fig. 23).⁴²

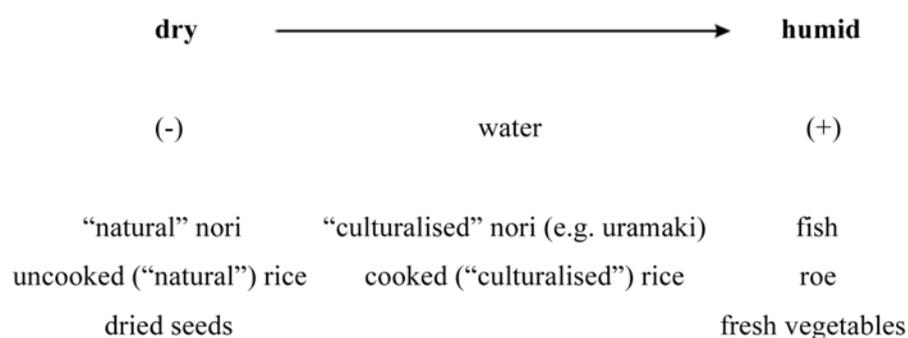


Figure 23 – Dry and humid elements of sushi – extended version.

The same gradualness characterises the passage from Nature to Culture: given that even the most simple and slight intervention of man on any ingredient—be the result either raw or cooked—makes it abandoning the first pole to move toward the second one, as it implies a certain degree of *elaboration*, it is still possible to ascribe the elements composing sushi to different positions in the *continuum* between these two extremes. It is remarkable that, in any case, the elements closest to the pole of Nature are placed either at the centre (raw fish and fresh vegetables) or on the outside (roe, seeds, or “natural” *nori*), with rice (whose practice of

⁴⁰ The reference is here to the action of the cook, who changes the nature of *nori*, by putting it into contact with more or less humid elements.

⁴¹ In a process that resembles the previously analysed “culturalisation” of rice.

⁴² Condiments are not considered here as only some of them—such as soy vinegar—are actually used in the preparation of sushi, effectively forming part of it, while others—such as soy sauce—can be added or not by the eater just before consumption. In any case, they would evidently correspond to the maximum degree of humidness, thus appearing as the most right-placed element in Fig. 23.

preparation marks it in terms of proximity to the rotten rather than to the cooked, according to Lévi-Strauss' theorisations) mediating their opposition. Finally, *nori*, can occupy different positions: while appearing close to the unelaborate when wrapping sushi from the outside, the seaweed gets closer to Culture in *uramaki*, where its further “culturalisation” makes it occupy a position similar to that of rice, to which it is also contiguous.

The “wrapping principle”, therefore, plays a crucial role in the configuration of sushi. To the point that the same sushi could be conceived as the *prototype*⁴³ (cf. Eco 1997) of all “wrapping objects”: although its configuration changes when considering different typologies, its structure always implies more layers, with a “centre” or “heart” representing the only changeless element with respect to the previously mentioned aspects. Moreover, the highlighted gradualness distinguishing sushi stresses the importance of the centre, making its contrasts—or sometimes rhymes, as in the case of *uramaki*—with the external layer somehow “permeable” and “crossable” according to a precise order. Such order is even more important as regards the *taste* dimension: not only the heart of sushi houses its most “natural” ingredients, but it always represents its most savoury part. This is

⁴³ The concept of *prototype* has been variously conceived and analysed by different scholars, among which Eleanor Rosch and Barbara B. Lloyd (1978), Dirk Geraerts (1989), and Umberto Eco (1997). Particularly, the latter resumes the main theorisations about such idea stating that

Uno dei modi in cui si intende correntemente il prototipo è che esso sia un membro di una categoria, che diventa come un modello per riconoscere altri membri che condividono con esso alcune proprietà ritenute salienti. [...] Altri inclinano a considerarlo piuttosto uno schema, un fascio di tratti, e in tal senso sarebbe più affine allo stereotipo. [...] Una terza versione vorrebbe i prototipi come qualcosa di più astratto, un insieme di requisiti esprimibili proposizionalmente, necessari per predicare l'appartenenza a una categoria (Eco 1997, 168).

(One current conception of prototype sees it as a member of a category, which becomes a model for recognising other members sharing certain properties considered salient with it. [...] Others are inclined to consider it rather a pattern, a bundle of traits, and in that sense it would be more akin to the stereotype. [...] A third version would interpret prototypes as something that is more abstract, as a set of requirements that can be expressed propositionally, and are needed to assert membership in a category [translation mine]).

Here the term is used in the sense of an element that can be elected as paradigm or model of a category of objects or entities (cf. Eco 1997, 110).

true both in the cases of complete wrapping, as in the previously analysed examples, and when it is partial, as in *nigirizushi* or *oshizushi*.⁴⁴ In the latter, raw—or, when necessary to make it edible or adjust its flavour, cooked—fish or fresh vegetables (especially avocado) wrap rice, although not completely (Fig. 24).

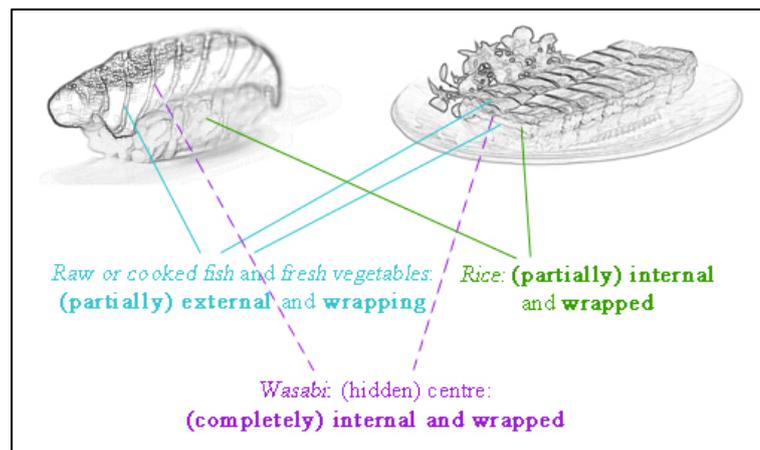


Figure 24 – Wrapping and wrapped elements in *nigirizushi* and *oshizushi*.

Sometimes, a thin strip of *nori* is used to bind toppings to the rice, thus introducing complete wrapping and considerably altering the configuration of *nigirizushi*, as showed in Fig. 25.

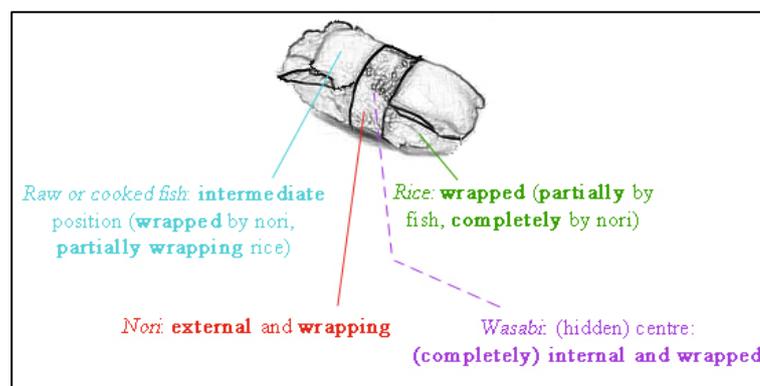


Figure 25 – Wrapping and wrapped elements in *nigirizushi* with *nori*.

⁴⁴ *Chirashizushi* is not considered here as it represents a particular case whose complexity extends the “wrapping principle” to the level of objects (the container used to serve it), also including different—and changeable—elements.

Notwithstanding the structural differences between these types of sushi, on the one hand, and the analysed forms of “sushi rolls”, on the other hand, the centre still remains its most savoury and most difficultly accessible part: if in the case of *hosomakis*, *futomakis*, *temakis*, and *uramakis* the most tasty ingredients coincide with the raw fish and the vegetables located at the centre,⁴⁵ in *nigirizushis* and *oshizushis* the most savoury element—*wasabi*—is not visible, but it is concealed within the different layers, in a hidden centre that reveals itself only in a second moment, when it gets in contact with the tongue. This connects to and further stresses the importance of another crucial aspect related to sushi and, more generally, to *washoku*, analysed in the previous: the fundamental role played by sight and by particular dynamics related to the opposition to show/to conceal.

Beyond the various typologies and configurations—whose differences, as we have seen, concern both the *syntagmatic* (the order of the different layers) and the *paradigmatic* (the different ingredients chosen for the different layers) axis—, therefore, the taste dimension and the visual level, together with the other discussed elements, make sushi the prototypical embodiment of *tsutusmi*, which is that “wrapping principle” that, as analysed before, represents an essential element characterising not only the Japanese dining environment and food, but rather the entire Japanese semiosphere. This, in turn, is fundamental in showing how every piece of sushi is at the same time a fragment but also a *totality*. A totality of flavours, layers, visible elements, functions, and meanings. In other words, a totality of “senses”.

4.5.4 Western-style Sushi through the Lens of Semiotics

What happened to sushi when it becomes an *ethnic* food? As mentioned before, its “export” outside the borders of the Japanese semiosphere has caused its

⁴⁵ As in this case *wasabi*—which is tastier than raw fish—is not put into the plate itself, but can be added in a second moment by the same consumer.

adaptation to various and changeable foodsheres. Particularly, with respect to the so-called “Western-style sushi”, whose origins date back to the 1960-70s in California, we made reference to the importance of two specific typologies, which have spread worldwide and are still the most common and consumed ones across the entire globe: the California Roll and the Alaska Roll.

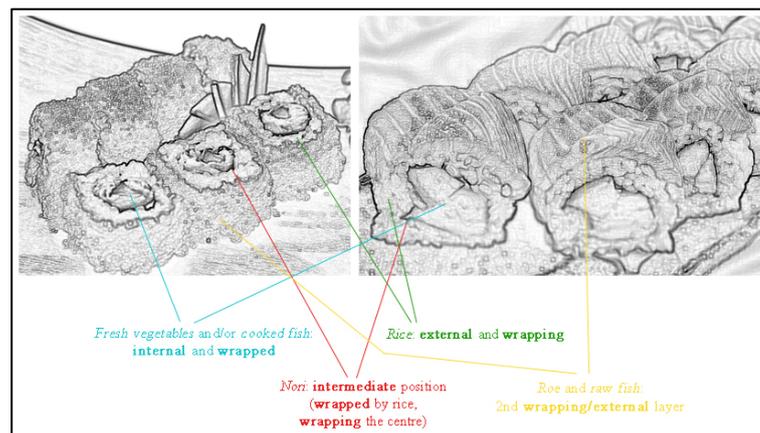


Figure 26 – Wrapping and wrapped elements in Western-style sushi.

First of all, it should be remarked that, albeit nothing changes as regards *nori*, which remains in an intermediate position—wrapping the centre but in turn wrapped by rice, and assuming the particular “culturalised” form we described in the previous—and rice—still external and wrapping both the seaweed and the centre—, more evident variations characterise the most internal layer, as well as the most external one. In order to go along with the local taste, the centre of sushi abandons its raw characterisation⁴⁶ to assume a mixed configuration, which still includes fresh vegetables but tends to prefer cooked to raw fish. Both the crab meat and its surrogate *kani kama* used for California Rolls and for Alaska Rolls, in fact, are boiled. On the other hand, Alaska Rolls sometimes include raw salmon or even just avocado or other fresh and raw vegetables at their centre, therefore

⁴⁶ It should be remembered that in *washoku* cooked fish is used for sushi just in the case of otherwise not edible species or when cooking is required in order to adequately change their flavour. Cf. §4.5.2.5.

moving back toward the vertex of the raw.⁴⁷ What is more noticeable in this case concerns the most external layer, or second wrapping layer, which is made no more of roe or seeds, but of raw salmon, altering the typical conformation characterising the traditional Japanese sushi. With respect to both the visual level and the taste dimension, this causes important changes. Although the wrapping structure is still present and fundamental, the centre loses the uniqueness that previously characterised it, with important implications on the resulting *synesthesias* related to the eating experience and the same identification of sushi with the prototypical embodiment of that wrapping principle constituting one of the elements at the core of the Japanese semiosphere. More than simply involving a material transformation, therefore, the adaptation of sushi to other foodspheres implies very important processes of *re-semantisation* affecting not only its practices of preparation and consumption, but also—and above all—its meanings.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ As highlighted above, even the most simple and slight intervention of man on any ingredient—be it raw or cooked in different ways—makes it abandoning the pole of Nature to move toward that of Culture, as it implies a certain degree of *elaboration*. The emphasis on the opposition “raw” vs. “cooked” is used here to refer to the fact that Alaska Roll is somehow less elaborate than the California Roll, according to what described when dealing with the passage from Nature to Culture (cf. §4.5.3).

⁴⁸ The analysis of more variations, which will be considered in the following chapter, will provide further evidence with respect to this point.

CHAPTER 5 – FIELD ANALYSIS

Abstract

Chapter 5 deals with the field analysis: six significant case studies (Arcadia and Wasabi in Italy; Guu Izakaya and Shinobu in Canada; Ginger and Sansui in Switzerland), chosen according to the premises discussed in Chapter 3, are firstly introduced and analysed with respect to their logos and signs, which represent crucial systems of their visual identity. Paragraph 5.2 draws the attention to the textual dimension of the menu, considering not only its linguistic and visual dimension, but also the syntagmatic and paradigmatic level, as well as some practices concerning it. Paragraph 5.3 is devoted to the analysis of the spatial dimension: here a “zoom movement” individuates three different levels of observation, whose details are presented and carefully examined in separate sections. From the macro-level of the eating place and the practices related to it, the analysis progressively approach the intermediate level of the table and proxemic patterns, finally reaching the micro-level of plates and food, considered not only in their internal configuration but also—and above all—with respect to the “techniques of the body” and the practices of the subjects whose images they presuppose, but who at the same time modify them. With respect to all these dimensions, different elements are considered, ranging from material aspects to visual configurations, narrative dynamics, and proxemic patterns. Each section includes a conclusion, while more general considerations are presented in the last paragraph.

5.1 The Corpus of Analysis: A First Approach

After having considered the main aspects related to *washoku*, from food to the spatial and temporal dimension, from utensils and other objects to practices, we will deal in the following with the *field analysis*.¹ Building on the premises described in Chapter 3, we will analyse six significant case studies (*Arcadia* and *Wasabi* in Italy; *Guu Izakaya* and *Shinobu* in Canada; *Ginger* and *Sansui* in Switzerland), observed from April 2011 to November 2013. Before proceeding with the analysis, however, it is worthwhile to report some basic information about each of these food services.

Arcadia was opened in 1987 in Turin (Italy) as a restaurant serving food typical of Piedmont and Italy. Since 1995, however, it has started to also offer Japanese dishes, becoming one of the first “sushi bars” in Italy and the first one in Turin, not only for date of establishment, but also for importance and reputation. This double nature is explicitly mentioned even in the logo of the restaurant (Fig. 27), which—it should not be forgotten—represents one of the most important systems of its *visual identity* (cf. Floch 1995) and is present at different levels, from the menu to the spatial dimension. Although maintaining unaltered its visual component (recalling the arcades of the main dining room, as well as the name of the restaurant), the logo was changed after 1995 with respect to the textual dimension, where, in addition to “ITALIAN RESTAURANT”, the words “& SUSHI BARS” appeared.



Figure 27 – Arcadia’s logo (© Arcadia).

¹ Even though meaning is the result of a complex and articulated set of processes where each element makes sense only in relation to others, a systematic exposition requires establishing a subdivision among the various factors considered. Therefore different paragraphs will be devoted to the analysis of different elements, which, however, will never be conceived as independent elements, but always as hubs interconnected among each other in a wide net. For this same reason, moreover, very often it will be impossible to clearly separate each factor from the others, leading us to constantly establish links among different segments or consider more variables at the same time.

On the visual side, moreover, although the logo maintained its original configuration, a new image was created and used together with it as visual statement of the restaurant identity. That image is the sign of the restaurant (Fig. 28), located in the window next to the door of the main entrance, and also available on the restaurant webpage.²

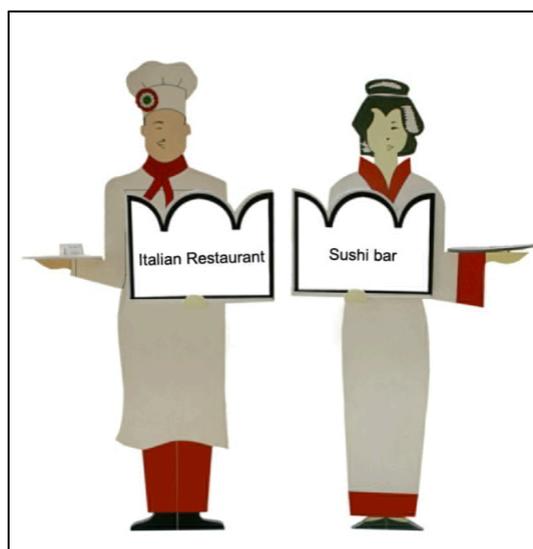


Figure 28 – Arcadia's sign, main entrance window (© Arcadia).

Here the dual nature of Arcadia is evident not only at the textual level, but also and above all in the visual dimension: on the left side of the sign the tricolour cockade of a male silhouette's hat reveals his Italian identity; on the right, by contrast, the dress and hairstyle of a female figure reference the image of a Japanese woman. Only the external halves of the two silhouettes are well defined, suggesting that they are complementary and defining the identity of the restaurant as “half-Italian” and “half-Japanese”. Finally, the choice of English for the plaques held by the two figures (“Italian Restaurant” and “Sushi bar”) symbolises openness toward any type of customer and contributes to put the emphasis on mediation and “translation” processes.

By contrast, *Wasabi* (Turin, Italy), which opened its doors in 1997, represents itself as a traditional Japanese restaurant, from the preparation and presentation of the dishes to the spatial design and the nationality and appearance of cooks and waiters. Nonetheless

² www.foodandcompany.com/galleryarcadia.html.

its logo (Fig. 29) reveals a first clue of the processes of “translation” underlying the eating experience it offers: next to the drawing of the famous Japanese horseradish—after which the restaurant is significantly named, as it is one of the most representative elements of the Japanese foodsphere—and the Japanese characters reporting its denomination, the transliteration (“wasabi”) of the word appears to make it understandable to local people not able to read the ideograms.



Figure 29 – Wasabi’s logo.

First established in Vancouver (Canada) in 1993, *Guu Izakaya* was exported to Toronto in 2009, where a second restaurant was baptised exactly as its westerner predecessor. Named after the common Japanese place for after-work drinking, where sake is served together with other drinks and some foods (居酒屋, “izakaya”, a compound word composed of *i*, “to stay”, and *sakaya*, “sake shop”³), it aims at synthesising tradition and modernity, trying to combine *washoku* with Canadian taste. This is reflected even in the logo of the restaurant (Fig. 30), with its name inscribed in both Japanese signs and Latin letters, but with the same graphic style, which recalls the famous Japanese art of calligraphy. Moreover, it is remarkable that the logo is generally either white on a black background or black on a white background, with a

³ Cf. Kondō 1984.

monochromatic inversion symbolising its versatility, that is, its ability to adapt to changeable situations and environments—in other words, to take part in “translation” processes.



Figure 30 – Guu Izakaya’s logo (© Guu Izakaya).

By contrast, *Shinobu* (Toronto, Canada) presents itself as an “Authentic Japanese Restaurant”—as its logo (Fig. 31) significantly reports on a red⁴ background—, paying particular attention to the preparation and design of plates, which are prepared and served exclusively by a Japanese staff. Nonetheless, again, a translation is needed, and its first manifestation is the transliteration of the Japanese name of the restaurant, which precedes the Latin letters but still needs them in order to be understood by local people, most of whom cannot read Japanese.



Figure 31 – Shinobu’s logo (© Shinobu).

Ginger, opened in May 2000 in Zurich (Switzerland), explicitly declares its propensity for openness and mediation among different foodspheres through the description provided on its webpage:

⁴ The reference is here to the different meanings red is associated with in Japan (strength, energy, purity, and love), but above all to the Japanese flag, with a chromatic rhyme stressing the connection with the “authentic” foodsphere to which the restaurant make reference.

Traditional and contemporary Japanese cuisine at their height - combined to ensure the best of Far Eastern culinary art, composed with great refinement, thus offering a demanding clientele new sensual experiences. (www.ginger-restaurant.ch/en/restaurant.php)

The same concept characterises the logo of the restaurant (Fig. 32), where a stylised sans serif “G” suggests the idea of an “O” that has been opened, lending itself to the entrance of new elements.



Figure 32 – Ginger’s logo – Different versions (© Ginger).

The circle standing above the letter could therefore represent such new elements, whose variability is emphasised by its chromatic changeability, as its colour vary depending on the object hosting the logo (e.g. violet for the restaurant card, yellow on the entrance door, orange on the windows, etc.) or the detail the mouse is pointing at on the webpage⁵ (e.g. black for the main screen, pink for the first image, green and light blue for the menu, etc.). Finally, it should be noticed that no Japanese sign appears: the logo is dominated by the Latin letter “G”,⁶ the initial of the name of the restaurant, which in turn significantly refers not to the Japanese rhizome *par excellence* (wasabi), but to the more

⁵ www.ginger-restaurant.ch.

⁶ With the circle also recalling the “i”—the second letter—for its position.

common *ginger* (which is widely used in *washoku*, e.g. in *gari*, but also in other foodspheres, especially in South Asia, East Africa, and the Caribbean).

Finally, *Sansui*, born in Geneva (Switzerland) in 1993, aims at offering “the best of true traditional Japanese cuisine,”⁷ serving various foods of *washoku* in differently designed rooms.



Figure 33 – Sansui’s logo (© Sansui).

Its logo (Fig. 33) stresses the importance of nature—which represents a key feature of *washoku*—by the inclusion of a stylised, very simple flower on the right. Moreover, the name of the restaurant (on the left, in Japanese characters; in the middle, transliterated), literary meaning “mountain and water”, refers to the traditional Japanese landscape paintings, which further stresses the importance of the natural world. Nonetheless, as in the previously analysed cases, transliteration is a first indicator of the need for taking account of the “cultural” background, adapting to a different *semio*- and *food*-sphere.

All these restaurants were analysed building on the elements pointed out in Chapters 1, 2, and 4, particularly focusing on the traces left by translation processes. Such processes make reference not only to the level of the *food-material* (the ingredients used), but also and above all as regards to the *textual* dimension (the plates—with particular emphasis on sushi, as it is considered the most representative dish of *washoku* and has been resemantised over time according to the peculiarities of the foodsphere it has been brought to—and the menus, but also the texts introducing and identifying the services—the just mentioned logos, signs, etc.), the *spatial* and *temporal* level, *corporeality*, and the *ritual practices* related to the ethnic eating experience.

⁷ “Le meilleur de la véritable cuisine traditionnelle japonaise” (www.sansui.ch).

5.2 The Menu: From Language to Images, Passing through the Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Dimensions

The first clue of the process of translation of the culinary code is undoubtedly the *menu*, which should be analysed with respect to both the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic dimension, as well as in relation to the visual and lexical aspects characterising it.

How does the “translation” of the menu from one foodsphere to another take place? At which levels could the traces of such process be detected? Which words, in the names of dishes, are kept in their original language and which ones, in contrast, are subjected to more or less evident changes? In the last case, moreover, what are the effects of meaning arising from the transition from a linguistic system to another? And how can the iconic language intervene in and enhance such dynamics? Finally, what can be said with respect to the axis of process (syntagmatic dimension) and the axis of system (paradigmatic level)?⁸

5.2.1 Arcadia

In the case of Arcadia, the double soul of the restaurant is reflected in the menu, where the list of typical Italian and Piedmontese dishes hosts, just between the main courses and the desserts, four pages devoted to the presentation of Japanese plates (“Menu Sushi”, Fig. 34).

⁸ Volli (2000) refers precisely to the meal and the menu to illustrate the difference between the syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimension. The *axis of the system* involves a sort of *ramification* including all the possible substitutions or alternatives for each course (for example, the Italian *primo piatto*, which can consist of pasta, rice, polenta or other dry plates, but also of broth *minestra* or *minestrone* soup, etc.; with further differentiation for each level). On the other hand, the *processual axis* is arranged by *squares* or *slots*, involving the succession of dishes, as well as the coexistence of accompanying foods that remain on the table throughout the entire meal (cf. 40–41).



Figure 34 – Arcadia’s Menu, Sushi section (“Menu Sushi”) (© Arcadia).

Visually, with respect to the *figurative* dimension, there are no photographs, drawings, or graphics portraying the courses proposed. The only remarkable element in relation to the iconic code concerns the *eidetic* level: the black and white frame seems to refer to the shape of the arches standing above the main hall of the restaurant.⁹ From the *chromatic* point of view, monochromy seems to

⁹ Cf. §5.3.1.1.

suggest the ideas of simplicity and elegance, which are further enhanced by the *topological* dimension, with a basic highly ordered configuration based on the division of the page into two columns (vertical axis) and a single centrally located element (1st page) that is made more visible by its violation of that geometry.

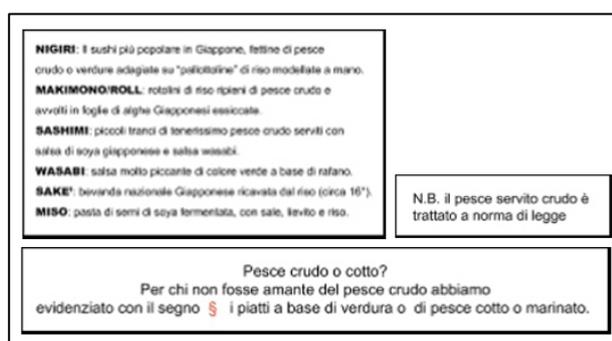


Figure 35 – Arcadia’s Menu, notes and captions (© Arcadia).

By contrast, the verbal component seems to be much denser, opening the way to interesting observations related to the process of translation of the culinary code in both the linguistic dimension and the axes of system and process. In general, Japanese is scarcely used, neither in terms of writing code (there are no ideograms, but words written using the letters of the Latin alphabet) nor with respect to vocabulary: most of the expressions are translated into English (e.g. *Salad*, *California Roll*, *Salmon Crispy Roll*, *Soup*, *Tuna*, etc.) or Italian (*Frittura Giapponese*), and the only words in Japanese—written according to the common rules of transliteration, using the Latin alphabet—refer to diverse widely spread names of ingredients (*Maguro*, “tuna”), dishes (*Maki*), or their techniques of preparation (*Tataki*,¹⁰ *Teryaki*¹¹). It is also very interesting to remark the inclusion of notes and captions explaining the names of plates (*Nigiri*, *Makimono/Roll*, *Sashimi*, *Wasabi*, *Sakè*, *Miso*, Fig. 35, on the left), giving notice of the distinction

¹⁰ Also known as *tosa-mi*, *tataki* is a Japanese cooking technique for the preparation of fish or meat, which are rapidly seared over a hot flame or in a pan, briefly marinated in vinegar, thinly sliced, and finally seasoned with ginger. For more details, cf. Lowry 2005, 123.

¹¹ Typical of Japanese cuisine, *teriyaki* is a cooking technique consisting in broiling or grilling food with a glaze of soy sauce, *mirin*, and sugar. For more details, cf. Hosking 1995.

between raw and cooked fish (*Pesce crudo o cotto? Per chi non fosse amante del pesce crudo abbiamo evidenziato con il simbolo § i piatti a base di verdura o pesce cotto o marinato*, “Raw or cooked fish? For those who do not like raw fish, we used the symbol § to mark dishes containing vegetables or cooked or marinated fish” [translation mine], Fig. 35, at the bottom), or giving juridical information (*N.B. il pesce servito crudo è trattato a norma di legge*, “NB. The fish served raw is treated according to enacted law” [translation mine], Fig. 35, on the right).

With respect to the syntagmatic dimension, the main distinction established between *Antipasti* (“appetizers”), *Makimono / Roll*, and *Dolci* (“Desserts”) suggests, on the one hand, the attempt to adapt the Japanese eating experience—whose typical organisation, as discussed in the previous, requires that all courses are served at the same time—to the Italian model—which, in contrast, is based on the differentiation between appetizers, *primo piatto* (literally, “first course”), *secondo piatto* (literally, “second course”), and so on—and, on the other hand, the intention of highlighting the importance of *maki*—a typical Japanese food—as the main dish on the menu¹² (Fig. 36).

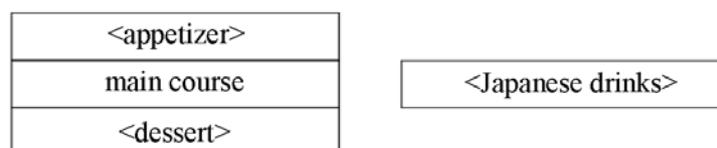


Figure 36 – Arcadia’s Menu: Syntagmatic dimension.¹³

¹² Even though it is not the only type of sushi included in the menu.

¹³ According to the model proposed by Volli (2000, 40), the structure of the processual axis can be visually represented through *squares* or *slots*, with triangular parentheses indicating optional elements and backslashes representing a choice. The box to the left refers to the succession of dishes, while the one to the right involves the presence of accompanying elements remaining on the table throughout the entire meal. In this case, it is essential to remark that, due to the hybrid nature of the restaurant, when Japanese food is not consumed at the sushi bar but at common tables, although not included in the menu, bread and/or breadsticks appear on the table too (as they are included in the common “cover” of tables). Although realisable for each of the cases considered, such scheme was proposed here for explicative purposes and will not be provided in the following, where verbal descriptions will be preferred to highlight the main aspects related to the structure of the processual axis identifiable in the menus.

At the paradigmatic level, although *maki* is identified as the main food representing Japanese cuisine, we find different options, which could be visually represented through a ramification scheme (Fig. 37).

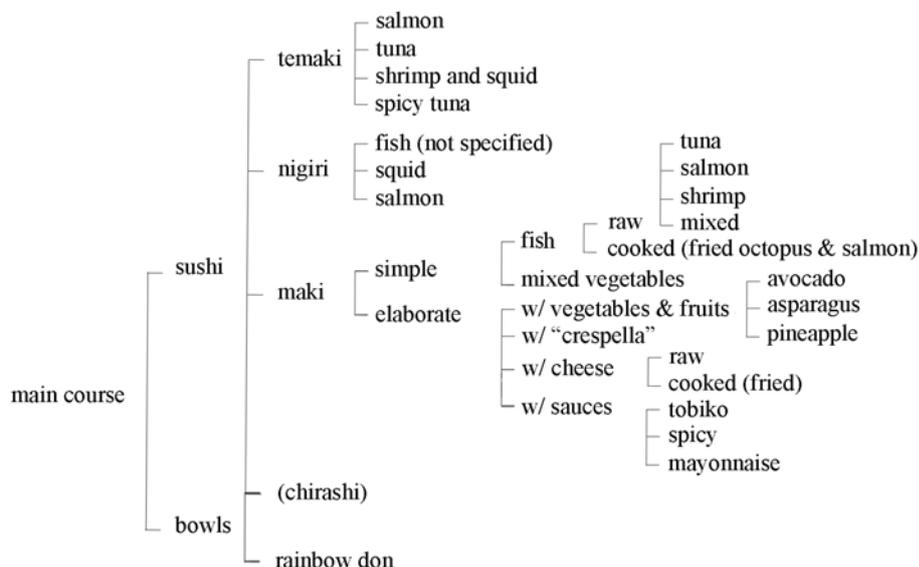


Figure 37 – Arcadia’s Menu: Paradigmatic dimension – Main Course.¹⁴

A similar structure could be built for the appetizers—and, particularly, for the condiments, which include sauces (barbecue sauce, spicy sauce, and *teriyaki* sauce), pickled vegetables, roe, and *guacamole* (a seasoning consisting of wasabi and avocado, whose name interestingly refers to the Mexican foodsphere¹⁵ rather than to the Japanese one)—, and drinks—which are here presented with respect to their internal organisation (alcoholic [*beer*—Kirin, Sapporo, Asahi—or *sake* or *umeshu*] or non-alcoholic beverages [*green tea*]), but could also be relocated within the system of all the beverages offered by the restaurant (albeit the decision

¹⁴ Cf. Volli 2000, 40. This scheme (which could be built with respect to other components—e.g. appetizers—of this same menu too), as well as the one describing the syntagmatic level, can be traced for each of the considered case studies. Nonetheless, visual diagrams will be provided only when necessary to clarify or highlight particular points of interests.

¹⁵ Although it is nowadays widely spread, *guacamole* is an avocado-based sauce originating with the Aztecs in Mexico, where it still represents one of the most representative elements of the local foodsphere. It should be noticed that its traditional recipe does not actually include wasabi.

to include just “Japanese drinks” here suggests the invitation to complement the Japanese meal with one of them rather than with the elsewhere listed common western beverages). As regards to desserts, by contrast, the structure is very simple, including just two options: green tea ice cream or cream ice with *umashu* (which, as the menu clarifies, is a Japanese liqueur made from plum: *liquore di prugna giapponese*).

Finally, it should be noticed that there are different “tasting menu”, offering customers pre-set selections of dishes consisting of sushi (*sushi Sapporo*, “Sapporo sushi”), sashimi (*misto sashimi*, “mixed sashimi”), or different plates (*menu giapponese*, “Japanese menu”). In these cases, however, no clear indications about the foods in the menu are offered, making it necessary to ask the waiters¹⁶ for information.

5.2.2 Wasabi

As regards to Wasabi, the linguistic code assumes more relevance: first of all, it is remarkable the large presence of logographic characters (*kanji*), as well as of the Japanese writing system known as *kana*.¹⁷ On the cover of the menu (Fig. 38), which is made of wood, there are some *kanji* characters, which, according to the common rules of Japanese language, should be read from top to bottom. Such ideographs mean “menu”: transliterable as /O/, the first symbol represents a courtesy formula; /KON/ and /DATE/ mean “list”; and /CYO/ refers to a “book” or “notebook”. It is an ancient formula, which even in Japan is generally used only in very traditional restaurants. *Hiragana* dominates instead the first paper page (Fig. 39), indicating the name of the restaurant—and together of one of the most representative ingredients of *washoku*: *wasabi*.

¹⁶ Or cooks, if sitting at the sushi bar (cf. §5.3.1.1).

¹⁷ The denomination *kanji* (漢字) refers to the adopted logographic Chinese characters (*hanzi*) used in the modern Japanese writing, while *kana* are syllabic Japanese scripts, generally distinguished into modern cursive *hiragana* (ひらがな), modern angular *katakana* (カタカナ), and their ancestor *man'yōgana* (万葉仮名, the disused old syllabic use of kanji).



Figure 38 – Wasabi’s menu.

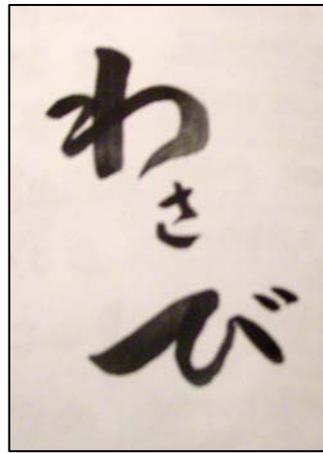
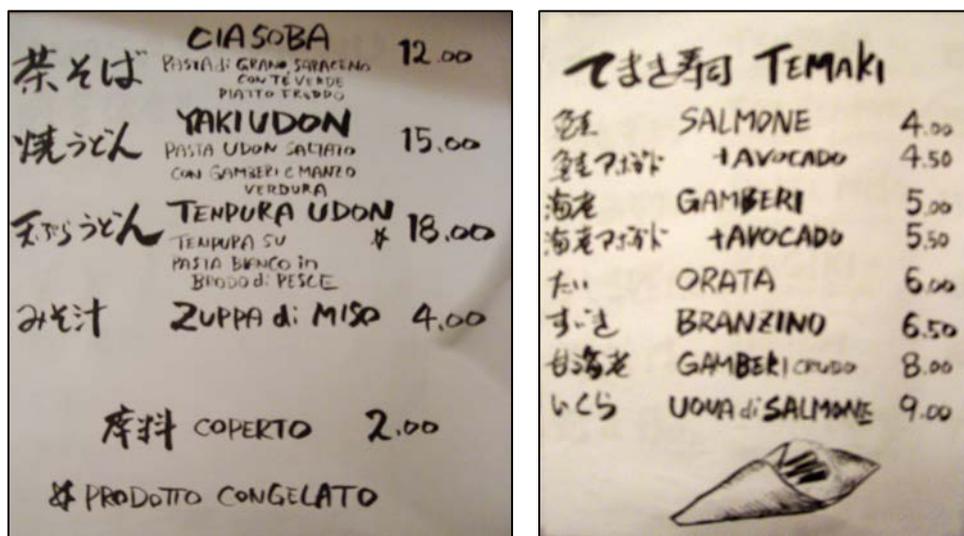


Figure 39 – Wasabi’s menu (first page).

In the central pages of the menu, *kanji* and *kana* are still used, but there is an essential change: the traditional Japanese vertical system of writing and reading is replaced by the left-to-right model, according to the European standard. Moreover, the Latin alphabet is used for words translating (e.g. *Salmone + avocado*, “Salmon & avocado”, *Gamberi + avocado*, “Shrimps & avocado”, *Orata*, “Gilthead bream”, etc., Fig. 40) or transliterating (e.g. *Ciasoba*, *Yakiudon*, *Tenpura Udon*, etc., Fig. 40) the ideograms on the left. Finally, given that the names of plates are generally kept in Japanese, in many cases we find captions in Italian providing their descriptions (e.g. *CIASOBA – Pasta di grano saraceno con tè verde – Piatto freddo*, “CIASOBA – Buckwheat pasta with green tea – Cold course” [translation

mine]). A special comment, moreover, notifies that some ingredients—opportunely marked by a star—are not fresh but frozen (*Prodotto congelato*, “Frozen ingredient” [translation mine], Fig. 40).



Figures 40 (left) and 41 (right) – Wasabi’s Menu.

At the visual level, although even in this case there are no pictures of dishes, the section devoted to *temaki* (Fig. 41) includes a drawing—the only one in the menu—which illustrates the composition of the plate: a roll of seaweed containing rice, fish, and avocado.

Another very interesting element is the use of two types of materials for the menu—paper for the inside pages, wood for the cover—, which significantly refers to the spatial configuration of the restaurant, as well as of the traditional techniques of construction of buildings in Japan. In addition, it is remarkable that, unlike common Western habits and in accordance with Japanese customs, the menu requires its user to turn its pages from left to right and not from right to left (Fig. 38).

Finally, from the syntagmatic point of view, the different sections of the menu are not set according to the—typically Italian—distinction among appetizers, *primo piatto*, *secondo piatto*, and desserts, but rather depending on the type of

food (sushi, sashimi, temaki, rice, ramen, soups, fish, meat, etc.), without any strict and well-specified segmentation, but rather as a sort of uninterrupted flux. As a consequence, as regards to the paradigmatic axis, there is not a very complex structure (such as in the previous case), but instead different lightly branched ramifications referring to the multiple type of foods listed. Moreover, there is an exception to this configuration, introducing interesting differences: despite maintaining a classification based on the type of food (soup, sushi and sashimi, tempura, rice), the tasting menu (*Wasabi menu*, 8th page of the menu, Fig. 42) partially takes the shape of the typical Italian menu, coming to assume a structure including six unspecified appetizers (“6 tipi di antipasti”), two main courses (sushi and sashimi and tempura), a side dish (plain or *huiki* rice), a dessert, and a coffee, which are brought to the table following such order and not all at the same time.



Figure 42 – Wasabi’s menu (8th page: tasting menu).

To conclude, it is interesting to note that the desserts menu is provided separately, when costumers have finished their main courses¹⁸, and that it offers more choices than the previously analysed case, including cakes, ice creams, and other Japanese sweet foods. Moreover, a list of beverages is provided for separate (Fig. 102). In both cases, the cover differs from that of the main menu because it is

¹⁸ As it is rather usual in Italy.

made of a different material: plastic coated rice paper substitutes wood, marking a difference but, at the same time, keeping the reference to the Japanese semiosphere. Some drawings or decorations (floral motifs on the desserts list, and a coloured drawing of a Japanese woman and a Japanese man on the list of drinks) further enhance such reference. Furthermore, no changes affect the structure of the *carte* with respect to the codes and practices of writing and reading: on the outside, only Japanese signs, in a vertical order, clarify the aim and the content of the menu (“List of Drinks”, “List of Desserts”); the internal pages, which should be turned from left to right, host instead both Japanese characters (original names) and Latin letters (transliterations and translations), reported in a horizontal order, according to the local use.

5.2.3 Guu Izakaya

In the case of Guu Izakaya, there are two different menus: the “fixed menu” (Fig. 44) is available both at the restaurant and on its website; the “menu of the day” (Fig. 43), on the contrary, can be consulted only at the eating place.



Figure 43 – Guu Izakaya’s menu of the day (only at the restaurant).



Figure 44 – Guu Izakaya’s fixed menu (folding brochure) (© Guu Izakaya).

The two menus are very different not only for their contents—with sashimi, sushi (*chirashi don*), and sweets being present only in the second list, together with special plates that are not included within the more common ones introduced by the first menu—, but also and above all with respect to the level of expression. If the *carte* available both at the restaurant and on the Internet (hereafter “A”) is black with white writings and some coloured elements, the menu of the day (“B”), entirely monochromatic, is characterised by a white background with black words and lines. Moreover, while A adopts both Japanese characters and the Latin alphabet (for the transliteration, translation, and description of plates), B includes only words written using the Western standard set of letters. Nevertheless, if in the first case both a font imitating handwriting and a common typeface are used on a

plastic coated brochure, in the latter every word seems handwritten¹⁹ on a common paper page, with a style recalling the famous Japanese calligraphic art. This seems to emphasise the ephemeral and changeable nature of the menu of the day, which contrasts with the durability and invariance of the other list.

As regards to the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes, in A the chromatic dimension plays a central role, with a system of coloured lateral bars signalling the distinction among “appetizers” (red), “salads” (dark green), “cold dishes” (light green), “deep fried” foods (orange), “oden” (yellow), “grilled” plates (pink), and “rice and noodle”-based dishes (light blue). By contrast, in B the use of the monochrome requires different solutions, which consist in some sketched and not completely closed squares (eidetic level) and in a symmetrical organisation of the page (topological level), with two oblique squares, one on the top-left (the only element not referring to the food offered, but rather to the same eating experience and its spatial configuration: “Patio Open!”) and one to the bottom-right (“sweets”), and two vertical elements (the “sashimi” box, on the bottom-left, and a not-encircled list of main courses, on the top-right). It is also remarkable that, in A, the names of the plates are located at the centre of squares with dotted line borders, which somehow breaks its fixed characterisation, giving the impression of a sort of mosaic whose small pieces can be rearranged according to the customer’s choice and taste, therefore insisting on the paradigmatic dimension and highlighting the active role of the eater. More fixed, instead, is the list of drinks—present only in A—, whose extension and variety, however, offer customers a great possibility of choice.

To conclude the analysis of the visual dimension, attention must be paid to the drawing represented in A (cover and back, Fig. 43), whose stylised figures, elegant geometries, and chromatic simplicity unequivocally refer to the Japanese semiosphere, suggesting the idea of a human silhouette made of colourful cards representing natural scenes (animals, vegetables, and landscapes)²⁰ or symbolic

¹⁹ Evidently, not every menu of the day is an original document, but rather a photocopy of a firstly handwritten page.

²⁰ Echoing the great attention paid by *washoku* to seasonality, freshness, and naturality (cf. §4.1).

elements (such as the star of the flag of the fourth-largest city on Japan,²¹ Sapporo, whose name is clearly readable). Finally, the rope on the left suggest the idea of *wrapping*, as it was a tier metaphorically keeping all the images together—albeit not covering them but somehow covered by them—, just as an *obi* would hold in place the coloured kimono of the anthropomorphic figure they represent.

At the linguistic level, we mentioned in the previous that whereas the menu of the day is entirely written using the Latin alphabet, the other menu includes both Latin and Japanese writing, making it effectively completely bilingual. This is even more interesting if we consider that the only list including sashimi and sushi is the first one, which reports the original Japanese names (*Amaebo*, *Uni*, *Shimaaji*, in the case of sashimi; *Chirashi Don*, in the case of sushi), but adapting them to the Western system of writing. In some cases, furthermore, there are also interesting lexical substitutions, as in the case of the “yellowtail *carpaccio*” (sashimi) or the “beef *taco*” (main courses), where the names of some plates typical of other foodspheres are used to describe the dishes proposed. Building on these observations, it could be argued that this menu seems rather to fit with the international hybridisation characterising the local taste, making the processes of translation more evident. On the other hand, more attention is paid to authenticity and tradition in A, where Japanese is always present and the denominations of dishes are generally simply transliterated, maintaining the original linguistic form, with English description of the plates after each name.

5.2.4 Shinobu

On the visual side, one of the most evident features of Shinobu’s menu (Fig. 45)—which is available both at the restaurants and on its website²²—is its propensity for minimalism: four white pages made of common paper host black

²¹ It is also remarkable that the chromatic configuration of the star seems to refer even to the well-known logo of a traditional Japanese brewery founded in 1876, named after the city.

²² www.shinobu.ca.

small blowtorch depicted in the first page—sixth image—and in the last one—first image on the right) and consumption (the typical Japanese ceramic spoon, second and fourth page). Each picture is accompanied by an English caption reporting the name of the represented plate, in order to provide the reader/eater with some examples of proposed dishes.

As regards to the syntagmatic dimension, there is not a clear criterion of classification: the distinction among “tapas” (in Japanese 一皿, with the *kanji* signs literally meaning “a single course”), “sushi entrées”, “salad”, “donburi”, and “sushi rolls” seems to refer, on the one hand, to the typical Western—and, particularly, Canadian—habit of eating an appetizer (whose section is surprisingly named according to the lexicon typical of the Spanish foodsphere) followed by a main course and a side dish (the miso soup complementing the sushi plates and the salads), and, on the other hand, to an organisation based on the type of food, with a processual structure stressing the importance of *rice*, as well as of the opposition *raw vs. cooked*. Considering the paradigmatic axis, in fact, the complex system underlying the menu could be represented by the scheme represented in Fig. 46.

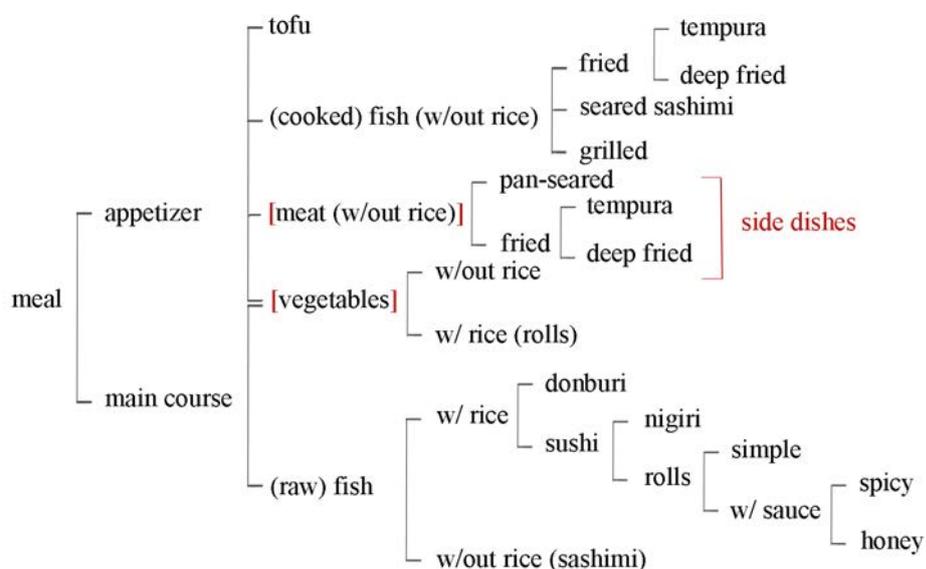


Figure 46 – Shinobu’s Menu: Paradigmatic dimension – Meal.

While tofu and meat appear only in the section “Tapas” (appetizers), the section on fish and vegetables has a more complex dynamic. The former is a component of main courses when it is served raw, either with rice (as in the case of *donburi* or sushi) or without it (i.e. sashimi),²³ but belongs to the class of appetizers when it is cooked (as in the case of *Shimesaba – Seared Mackerel Sashimi*). Vegetables, instead, could be either raw or cooked both in the “Tapas” and in the main courses section, but they belong to the latter only when forming part of rice-based foods (such as in the case of sushi rolls). When served without rice, they can be consumed either as appetizers or as side dishes (e.g. salads). This associates them with meat (which, also appearing in this two sections, is never served with rice), as the red elements of the scheme depicted in Fig. 46 illustrate. Finally, it should be remarked that neither desserts nor drinks are included in the menu: while the former are mentioned in a list handwritten with a piece of chalk on the blackboard standing close to the kitchen (Fig. 76), the latter require a direct inquiry through the waiter, without any printed or written list providing details.

5.2.5 Ginger

Ginger’s menu (Fig. 47), available both on the website of the restaurant²⁴ and at the venue in identical form, is characterised by a minimalist geometrical style presenting different elements of interest.

²³ It is interesting to notice that, even when fish forms part of plates not including rice, as in the case of sashimi, the menu specifies that it will be served with a side dish of plain rice.

²⁴ www.ginger-restaurant.ch.

<p>COLD DISHES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">  sashimi variations different fishes chopped by japanese master hand  spicy sea bass carpaccio sea bass served with spicy chili / sesame sauce  tuna yukke with yam and cucumber  lotus root salad served with sesam sauce  mixed seaweed salad served with japanese sauce  spinach salad served with sesam sauce and bonito flakes  edamame boiled soya beans sprinkled with sea salt <p>DESSERTS</p> <p>ice cream please ask our staff for our varied offer of ice creams and home-made desserts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 420 1 scoop 800 2 scoops 1200 3 scoops + 250 with sweet azuki beans topping <p>900 fruit salad</p> <p>choya - plum wine d 700 served chilled or warm</p>	<p>YOU LIKE IT EASY SURPRISING</p> <p>GINGER'S MENU</p> <p>You will be served a special chosen menu. Let the versatility of the japanese kitchen convince you.</p> <div style="text-align: right;">  </div> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center;">HAZUKI 7000 per person</td> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center;">SOUGETSU 8500 per person</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;"> CHEF'S SURPRISE 先付け盛り合わせ 4 small kyoto-style appetizer HAMACHI CARPACCIO ハマチカルパッチョ 焼き茄子のビューレ lime marinated kingfish with aubergine sauce and shiso CRUNCHY SEAFOOD TEMPURA 海鮮かき揚げ shrimp, octopus and scallops fried with adama- me beans and corn in japanese batter SHAKE MISO 練のアボカド甲斐味噌焼き cooked salmon fillet with aubergine on dengaku miso MISO SOUP お味噌汁 </td> <td style="text-align: center;"> CHEF'S SURPRISE 先付け盛り合わせ 4 small kyoto-style appetizer TATAR HAMACHI ハマチのタルタル味噌風味 finely chopped king fish tartare with ginger, shiso and miso SALMON MANGO IKURA トロサーモンのマリネ マンゴとアボカドのムース イクラあえ marinated salmon with mango-avocado mousse and salmon roe LOTUS CRAB BALLS 蟹入りレンコン団子 産直しぐままで cooked crabmeat balls, potato and lotusroots in bouillon brew MISO SOUP お味噌汁 </td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;"> DESSERT デザート + 500 per person </td> <td style="text-align: center;"> DESSERT デザート + 500 per person </td> </tr> </table>	HAZUKI 7000 per person	SOUGETSU 8500 per person	CHEF'S SURPRISE 先付け盛り合わせ 4 small kyoto-style appetizer HAMACHI CARPACCIO ハマチカルパッチョ 焼き茄子のビューレ lime marinated kingfish with aubergine sauce and shiso CRUNCHY SEAFOOD TEMPURA 海鮮かき揚げ shrimp, octopus and scallops fried with adama- me beans and corn in japanese batter SHAKE MISO 練のアボカド甲斐味噌焼き cooked salmon fillet with aubergine on dengaku miso MISO SOUP お味噌汁	CHEF'S SURPRISE 先付け盛り合わせ 4 small kyoto-style appetizer TATAR HAMACHI ハマチのタルタル味噌風味 finely chopped king fish tartare with ginger, shiso and miso SALMON MANGO IKURA トロサーモンのマリネ マンゴとアボカドのムース イクラあえ marinated salmon with mango-avocado mousse and salmon roe LOTUS CRAB BALLS 蟹入りレンコン団子 産直しぐままで cooked crabmeat balls, potato and lotusroots in bouillon brew MISO SOUP お味噌汁	DESSERT デザート + 500 per person	DESSERT デザート + 500 per person	<p>DO YOU ENJOY BEING SPOILT FOR CHOICE?</p> <p>GINGER'S A LA CARTE</p> <p>allow us to tempt you and sample several of our deli- cious different creations. Combine our extraordinary cold and warm dishes to a wonderful, varied, individual, multi-course menu.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">  1100 CHF  1300 CHF  1600 CHF  1800 CHF  2000 CHF  2300 CHF  2500 CHF
HAZUKI 7000 per person	SOUGETSU 8500 per person							
CHEF'S SURPRISE 先付け盛り合わせ 4 small kyoto-style appetizer HAMACHI CARPACCIO ハマチカルパッチョ 焼き茄子のビューレ lime marinated kingfish with aubergine sauce and shiso CRUNCHY SEAFOOD TEMPURA 海鮮かき揚げ shrimp, octopus and scallops fried with adama- me beans and corn in japanese batter SHAKE MISO 練のアボカド甲斐味噌焼き cooked salmon fillet with aubergine on dengaku miso MISO SOUP お味噌汁	CHEF'S SURPRISE 先付け盛り合わせ 4 small kyoto-style appetizer TATAR HAMACHI ハマチのタルタル味噌風味 finely chopped king fish tartare with ginger, shiso and miso SALMON MANGO IKURA トロサーモンのマリネ マンゴとアボカドのムース イクラあえ marinated salmon with mango-avocado mousse and salmon roe LOTUS CRAB BALLS 蟹入りレンコン団子 産直しぐままで cooked crabmeat balls, potato and lotusroots in bouillon brew MISO SOUP お味噌汁							
DESSERT デザート + 500 per person	DESSERT デザート + 500 per person							

Figure 47 – Ginger’s menu (pp. 4-6) (© Ginger).

First of all, it should be noted the choice of using a legend to specify the prices of the different courses: unlike the previously analysed cases, where the price was mentioned after the name of the plates using numerals, a system of variously coloured lines establishes different price categories, as the sixth page of the menu (Fig. 47, third image) clarifies. This confers elegance and refinement on the menu, whose harmonious and essential structure is partially broken by the table reporting the tasting menus (“GINGER’s MENU”, Fig. 47, in the middle), which therefore acquires prominence compared to other elements. Going on over the analysis of the visual dimension, it should be noticed that no images appear on the menu, where the previously mentioned legend represents the only element breaking the monochromy of pages, together with the light blue circle forming part of the logo of the restaurant (fifth page, Fig. 47, in the middle, and front page).

Linguistically, the Japanese system of writing not only is presented as secondary with respect to the English words—which always precede the Japanese characters—, but it is used only in the tasting menus, always after the English denomination of plates—or, in a few cases, following their transliterated Japanese names (*hamachi*, *ikura*, *tempura*). The note before the table containing

the menu, moreover, reports “You will be served a special chosen menu. Let the versatility of the Japanese kitchen convince you”, clarifying the message underlying the ordering of languages: rather than trying to keep as close as possible to the Japanese tradition, the menu—and the same eating experience it introduces—is shaped according to the local taste, which it can fit with (“convince”) by virtue of its flexibility (“versatility”).

The great attention paid to the local reality becomes evident also in other elements, such as the advising box referred to “sustainability” (Fig. 48) reported on the first page, where certification about food ethics and quality are provided, together with details concerning their provenance.



Figure 48 – Ginger’s menu (1st page) (© Ginger).

In addition to the almost complete absence of Eastern writing systems, English denominations (e.g. “seaweed”, “salmon”, “tuna”, “lotus root”, etc.) are generally used instead of Japanese transliterated words, which are kept just in the case of sushi, although always followed by their English translation (e.g. *maguro-tuna*, *hamachi-kingfish*, *ebi-shrimps*, etc.).

Finally, as regards to the syntagmatic and paradigmatic levels, in addition to the previously analysed set menus, four main sections can be clearly identified: *warm dishes*, *cold dishes*, *sushi* (*à la carte*—including uniquely *uramaki*, *nigiri*, and *temaki*—and *dishes*), and *desserts* (just ice cream or fruit salad). Again, therefore, the menu seems to aim at adapting the Japanese cuisine to the common practices

of the local foodsphere, as it explicitly affirms. To conclude, it should be noticed that there is no list of drinks, which are instead selected and ordered through direct interaction with the waiter. Moreover, the menu is provided in just one of the two dining rooms of the restaurant, while in the *sushi room*²⁵ eaters can select the desired plates directly picking them up from the conveyor belt where the cooks working in the central area in front of them unrelentingly put just-made dishes. In this case, the price categories are specified by a different legend, which finds expression in the number of fishes—one (for the cheapest option) to eight (for the most expensive one)—represented on the small dishes selected by the cooks for the different foods before delivering them to the belt (Fig. 49).



Figure 49 – Ginger’s price categories on plates.

5.2.6 Sansui

In the case of Sansui, we find different menus: on the website²⁶ of the restaurant various lists (“Nos Plats”, “Sushi”, “Nos Spécialités”,²⁷ Fig. 50) introduces some of the plates hosted in the plastic coated paper pages of the menu available at the dining place (Fig. 51), although in a slightly different form.

²⁵ For the analysis of the spatial configuration, cf. §5.3.1.5.

²⁶ www.sansui.ch.

²⁷ As well as “Lunch” and “Bento (Lunch)”, which will not be considered here as, according to what stated in Chapter 3, the focus is on the dinner.



Figure 50 – Sansui’s menu (Internet version) (© Sansui).



Figure 51 – Sansui’s menu (pp. 3-4).

The hazel and brown configuration of the Internet menu contrasts with the white of the paper page and the black of the characters printed on it, whose monochromy is broken by some images depicting the mentioned plates (with captions clarifying

their denomination), some of which already appeared on the website *carte* (albeit without any tagline), and a few drawings indicating particular categories of food (as in Fig. 48, where the coloured sketch of a fish appears in the section *Poissons grillés*, “Grilled Fishes”, and a pot presents the *Entrées chaudes*, “Hot Appetizers”). On the other hand, both menus are characterised by a simple and basic visual structure, whose graphical style seems to suit the common Western menus rather than the Japanese ones. It should also be noticed that, on the linguistic side, although both French words (written using the Latin alphabet) and Japanese signs are used, the latter always follow the former, inverting the order identified in the previous cases (with the exception of the other Swiss example, Ginger). Moreover, even the most common words, such as *makimono*, are translated into French with parentheses (“(rouleaux)”), and in the case of common ingredients, only the French name is kept, excluding the Japanese form (e.g. tuna is always named *tuner*, without any mention to the word *maguro* or *toro*). Even a plate as famous as *temaki* loses its original denomination, being indicated uniquely as *cornet* (“cone”).

As regards to the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes, focusing on the wider and more structured printed menu that recalls and enlarges the *carte* available on the website, clearly identifiable sections are set up according to different criteria. The main structure refers to the common local organisation of the meal, which distinguishes among appetizers (*entrées froides*, *entrées chaudes*), main courses (*makimono*; *sushi à la carte et assortiments*, “sushi à la carte or dishes”; *cornets*, “temaki”; *sashimi*), side dishes (*nouilles et accompagnements*), desserts (*glace*, “ice cream”, and a few Japanese traditional dishes), and drinks (beers, wines—local and Japanese ones—, *sake*, Japanese teas, water, and soft drinks). Within such configuration, other classifications can be identified: the sections of sushi and sashimi, for example, are structured according to a classification distinguishing and listing different types of fish, whose combinations (*sushi assortiments*) are not described in details but just visually represented through some pictures. Moreover, it is really interesting to focus on the criterion organising *makimono* into different

categories: traditional (*rouleaux traditionnels*), vegetarian (*rouleaux végétariens*), and “creative” (*rouleaux création*) makizushis are listed building on an opposition that could be described in terms of “tradition” vs. “innovation”, where the second term stands for adaptation to the local taste (both with “creative” solutions²⁸ and “vegetarian” options) and, therefore, for “translation”. The same contrast between local and ethnic food reappears in a similar way in the paradigmatic structure underlying other categories, such as drinks or desserts, where different products are presented on the basis of their provenance (as in the case of wines, divided into a list of Japanese wines and another one of local or European wines). Finally, it is remarkable that, among the several tasting menus (“menu soir” and “menus (servis avec riz et miso soup)”) proposed, the majority opt for meat instead of fish, counterbalancing its predominance in the other options, mainly based on sushi and sashimi. Moreover, meat is prevalent also in the section of hot appetizers, where the only plate containing fish is *huitres panées* (“oysters coated with breadcrumbs”).

To conclude, it should be observed that the first page of the menu, after the black front-page, echoes the main screen of the website (*Accueil*), hosting information about the restaurant and the different rooms²⁹ it is composed of, before introducing the different plates.

5.2.7 Conclusion

The analysis of the menu brings about some interesting initial observations on the processes of translation of the culinary code. As regards to the linguistic level, the presence of Japanese signs recalls the attempt to keep as close as possible to the original foodsphere the menu makes reference to. Thus the restaurants aiming at appearing “authentic” or “traditional” to customers’ eyes generally put

²⁸ Including the common California roll and Alaska roll, but also other variations such as the *Skin roll*, made of grilled salmon.

²⁹ Which will be analysed in the following (cf. §5.3.1.6).

particular emphasis on the Japanese linguistic code, always presenting its signs before their transliteration or interlingual translation (e.g. Wasabi, Shinobu, Guu Izakaya—fixed menu), or even assigning entire pages uniquely to its characters and their most common rules of writing and reading (e.g. Wasabi, first pages, where no transliteration or translation is provided). On the other hand, as mentioned before, the same concept of “ethnic” implies an external and foreign look, which, while getting in contact with a certain culinary system, needs to *translate* it, that is—according to the etymology of the word—, to “transfer” it from one semiosphere to another one. As all the analysed cases are ethnic restaurants, therefore, translation is unavoidable. Whatever purposes the Empirical Authors of the menu may have,³⁰ the list presenting the different courses cannot neglect its Model Reader, which is “a model of the possible reader [...] supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them” (Eco 1979b, 7). As any other text, the menu should take into consideration the reader’s encyclopaedia: “many texts make evident their Model Readers by implicitly presupposing a specific encyclopedic competence” (*ibid.*). For this reason, the choice of avoiding translation—as in the case of the first pages of the menu of Wasabi—is extremely dangerous, as it compromises the reader’s interpretative hypotheses, facilitating *aberrant decoding*. Moreover, it is interesting to note how interlingual translation often recalls different linguistic systems. This can be related to the purpose of showing openness and certifying the eating experience provider’s ability to manage translation processes (as in the case of Arcadia), thus reassuring the readers about the possibility to completely trust them. Or it can rather aim at showing a deep knowledge of the readers’ semiosphere, as in the case of Guu Izakaya or Shinobu, where terms such as “carpaccio” or “tapas” are preferred to the corresponding English expressions because of their general use within that particular cultural background. In any case, translation always relies on an indissoluble relation

³⁰ Either to valorise the eating experience as authentic and close to tradition or rather as open to change and innovation.

between texts and cultures, as it is made possible by the reader's encyclopaedia: the word "tapas" has a particular meaning in Canada, where it can be used to refer to a single dish course, thus perfectly translating the Japanese signs 一品, but it would assume on different connotations in Italy or in Switzerland, where it should be replaced by other expressions.

On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that the "text *creates* the competence of its Model Reader" (*ibid.*). In this sense, transliteration plays a crucial role, as it mediates between two very different writing/reading systems not simply by transposing the first one into the second one, but first of all by making its signs recognisable. Although most readers still are unable to understand the words' meaning, the menu provides them with the competence to identify the terms corresponding to given signs and, finally, to associate them with the used translated expressions, thus making the latter increasingly unnecessary over time (as in the case of "maki", "temaki", "teriyaki", and all the other words often recurring without any translation, as they have become part of the encyclopaedic competence of readers). This enhances the active role of readers, who are therefore stimulated to go beyond the simple reading of the list, grasping—albeit partially—the culinary code they are approaching.

The visual dimension intervenes in such dynamics in different ways. Sometimes pictures or drawings provide information about the composition of courses (e.g. Wasabi, Shinobu, and Sansui), the practices concerning their preparation or consumption (e.g. Shinobu), or the spatial configuration of the restaurant (e.g. Arcadia and Sansui), substituting or integrating explanations and descriptions. In other cases, the symbolic dimension emerges more evidently, recalling elements typical of *washoku* and, more generally, of the Japanese semiosphere (e.g. Guu Izakaya), or symbolising the versatile and open character of the eating experience (e.g. Ginger). It is also important to remark the significance of graphics, which can either imitate and recall the Japanese writing art (e.g. Guu Izakaya and Wasabi) or rather adapt to the common modern design (e.g. Arcadia and Ginger) or the chasteness (e.g. Shinobu and Sansui) of the target foodsppheres'

standards. Moreover, sometimes the same material configuration used for the menu plays an important role, as the examples of Wasabi and Guu Izakaya prove.

As regards to the axis of the process, despite the discrepancies among the different cases, two main tendencies can be identified: on the one hand, the Japanese meal is reshaped and presented to the readers according to the common syntagmatic structures of the place where the eating experience takes place. Thus the typical distinction among appetizers, *primo piatto*, *secondo piatto*, and desserts emerges in the Italian lists (more noticeably in the case of Arcadia than in that of Wasabi, where it concerns only the tasting menu), while the Canadian menus generally pay more attention to the separation between a single main course and different side dishes, and the Swiss *cartes* favour the opposition between cold and hot plates. On the other hand, the traditional organisation underlying the typical Japanese meal—generally based on the compresence on the table (or the tray) of different plates discerned by their ingredients—is reflected at the paradigmatic level, whose structure strongly differs from case to case, but which generally finds expression in the inclusion on the menu of categories differentiating foods according to their basic ingredients, at least in those cases where authenticity is particularly taken into consideration. Such aspects also draw attention to another very interesting element, which does not match the purposes of the present analysis, but is remarkable: the differences concerning *food-material*. Although offering customers a Japanese meal implies using particular ingredients and techniques of preparation, the “local factor” emerges not only from the numerous captions containing “sustainability” and health advices, or marking the differentiation between raw and cooked foods, but also in the predominance of some foodstuffs over others.³¹

Finally, particular attention should be paid to the level of *practices*: beyond the Model Reader and the criteria established by the text, it should be remembered that, in social life, Empirical Readers—i.e. the concrete subjects of the act of

³¹ In this case, the most significant example is that of the Swiss menus, together with the *carte* of Guu Izakaya, where meat becomes dominant, echoing its large use within such contexts.

textual cooperation (cf. Eco 1985, 80)—interact with the text-menu, filling in those “gaps” its interpretation demands them to complete according to their competence and will.³² Even when translation processes are concealed as much as possible at the textual level, they tend to become evident at the social level, when Empirical Readers pragmatically “cooperate” with the text. The syntagmatic dimension is emblematic in this sense: the fieldwork pointed out that, even in the case of Wasabi, whose menu tries to deconstruct the typical order underlying the consumption of the Italian meal, the Empirical Reader somehow re-establishes that order by asking—or, better, “ordering”—foods according to a precise sequence, which is related to his/her habits—and, therefore, to a particular foodsphere. To this end, as analysed before, some menus seem to stress the active role of customers, by complementing the fixed *carte* with a more variable list (e.g. the white paper menu of the day at Guu Izakaya, or the blackboard at Shinobu), or suggesting the idea of the menu as a mosaic of choices requesting the reader to act as a real *bricoleur* (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1962; Floch 1986; 1990) (e.g. Guu Izakaya). In some cases (e.g. Ginger), furthermore, the menu can also come to disappear, with price categories finding expression directly on the plates, which further enhances the idea of versatility of the eating experience and the active role of customers/readers.

To conclude, it is remarkable that, although different solutions can be adopted to try to conceal as much as possible the translation processes—either on the visual and material side or at the linguistic level, or even through a particular presentation of the syntagmatic structure and the axis of system—, translation is intrinsic to any ethnic eating experience, and it finds in the menu one of its most evident manifestations.

³² The text is “a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work” (Eco 1993, 3), by filling in a whole series of gaps of unsaid or previously said missing elements (cf. also Eco 1962 [ET 1989]; 1979).

5.3 Space, Body, Food, and Practices

According to José Enrique Finol,

El espacio en los estudios semióticos representa una estructura que juega un rol importante en la organización social, a través de él se da sentido a una organización social pero también a una serie de valores culturales que soportan ese orden social. El espacio se convierte en instrumento simbólico, capaz de articular los contenidos de la cultura misma en una sintaxis particular. (2006, 38)

(In semiotic studies, space represents a structure that plays an important role in the social organisation. Through it, meaning is given to a social organisation but also to a number of cultural values supporting that social order. Space becomes a symbolic instrument capable of articulating the contents of culture itself in a particular syntax ([translation mine]).³³

This observation is crucial when analysing food and commensality, as they take place in spaces that are generally “built by and for the actors—both those consuming and those preparing food—[who] take possession [...] and reinvent them in order to confer a symbolic meaning” (Maury Sintjago 2011, 3 [translation mine]) to the eating experience. Such dynamics become even more interesting and important in the case of the ethnic experience, whose development seems to be considerably influenced by the spatial dimension.

But what does it mean to analyse the spatial dimension related to food from a semiotic point of view? As Marrone (2001) states,

³³ José Enrique Finol, whose work has been cited here for its relevance and great ability of synthesis, is not the only one highlighting the importance of space for semiotic studies: from Barthes (1968) to Greimas (1976), from Bertrand (1985) to Lotman and Uspensky (1973), from Violi (1991; 1996) to Marrone (2001) and Cavicchioli (1996; 2002), many scholars have dealt with it, taking into consideration various aspects and questions. Cf. also §1.8.

La spazialità è un linguaggio a tutti gli effetti: così come le lingue verbali mettono in presupposizione reciproca una serie di articolazioni sonore (espressione) con una serie di articolazioni semantiche (contenuto), la spazialità è un sistema semiotico mediante il quale gli uomini attribuiscono senso e valore al mondo (contenuto) sulla base di un'articolazione fisica dell'estensione spaziale, sia essa naturale o costruita (espressione). (292)

(Spatiality is a language in every respect: as verbal languages establish a relation of reciprocal presupposition between a series of auditory articulations (level of *expression*) and a series of semantic articulations (level of *content*), space is a semiotic system through which people give meaning and value to the world (*content*) on the basis of a physical articulation of the spatial extension, whether natural or constructed (*expression*) [translation mine]).

Moreover, according to Lotman (1987), space has a double semiotic life: on the one hand, it shapes the universe according to its own image, projecting its internal forms to the outside world; on the other hand, it is itself modelled depending on the image of the universe that is typical of a given culture. The same idea is supported by Hammad (2003), who asserts that space confers significance to the society living in it while, at the same time, shaping it: it is the case of processes of mutual signification in which space, culture, and identity reciprocally *inter-define* themselves. In other words, the spatial text can be conceived as the result of the encounters and clashes between the various programs of action of the subjects living in and interacting with that space (Marrone 2001, 302). Such subjects, however, should not be conceived as individual subjectivities statistically describable, but rather—as Marrone supports—as *pre-personal* and *collective* subjectivities: when relating to space, the subject is “at the same time somatic and social, natural and cultural” (304 [translation mine]). The Italian semiotician then identifies three different aspects characterising the relation between subjects and spatiality (*ibid.*, 304–320). It is *intersubjective*, as the subject relating to space has a

body, which nonetheless is a *social* body, whose limits are not natural or fixed, but change depending on temporal and cultural variables, being modelled by social relations. It is also *somatic*, as we get in touch with space through our sensory apparatus, generating a sort of paradox: on the one hand, we perceive our body as an object in the world (and therefore as an entity *contained* by that world); on the other hand, we perceive the world, and ourselves in the world, through our body, which therefore somehow *contains* us and that world (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1945). Finally, it is *narrative*, as we “perceive our corporeal scheme depending on our purposes, that is, a *wanting-to-do* that, though not perfectly articulated at the level of our consciousness, is already an *incipient narrative program*” (Cavicchioli 1996, 17 [translation mine]). *De facto*, according to Marrone (2001),

La struttura semiotica di un testo spaziale [...] non è da intendere soltanto come l’articolazione fisica di una serie di cose materiali che, in ragione di codici culturali più o meno precostituiti, acquista alcuni significati umani e sociali (sacro/profano, privato/pubblico, maschile/femminile, superiore/inferiore, ecc.). (319)

(The semiotic structure of a textual space [...] is not to be understood only as the physical articulation of a series of material things that, because of more or less pre-established cultural codes, acquires specific human and social meanings (sacred/profane, private/public, male/female, superior/inferior, etc.) [translation mine]).

Both human beings and spaces can assume different actantial roles³⁴ depending on the situation. Particularly, according to the Italian scholar, three different types of subjectivity can be identified in relation to space: the *subjects enunciated in the space*

³⁴ The term *actantial role* refers to the fact that a character finds himself performing the function that in the narrative scheme is covered by a certain actant (cf. Volli 2000, 100–104). For more detailed information about narrative grammar and actants, cf. Greimas and Courtés 1979 (s.v. Actant); Greimas 1970; 1983.

correspond to the *topoi* covering actantial roles and modal configurations, thus interacting with other actants, which can be either human actors or other *topoi*; the *enunciational subjects of the space*, by contrast, are the narrative figures presupposed by spatiality, that is, its Model Users; finally, *social subjects* are those who actually get in touch with space, the Empirical Users who can accept their image as inscribed in the spatial text (enunciational subjects), or rather refuse it in different ways (cf. 320–322).

Building on these considerations, as well as on the idea of *embodied space* (Low 2009), the important contributions of proxemics (Hall 1968), and the studies on incorporation (Fischler 1988; 1990), as well as the socio- and ethno-semiotic researches described in Chapter 2, we will deal in the following with the analysis of the spatial dimension of the here considered ethnic eating experiences. Being impossible to take into consideration all the aspects that such an analysis would require covering, and given the aims of the present research, we decided to focus particularly on the narrative and intersubjective dimensions, overlooking the somatic and physiological levels. Focusing our attention particularly on the structure of the room where one eats (its size, the quantity and features of tables, chairs, decorations, and ornaments, the presence or absence of doors, walls, diving screens, windows, and curtains, as well as its chromatic, topological, or eidetic configuration, etc.), the preparation of the table (the quantity and features of covers, its chromatic, eidetic, and topological structure, etc.), and the internal organisation of the plate (the disposition of food, particular plays of shapes, colours, lights, and shades, oppositions and rhymes between full and empty spaces, etc.), we will try to decipher how the spatial dimension intervenes in the eating experience and, specifically, in the processes of “translation” underlying the ethnic meal. Moreover, the effects of meaning arising from such dynamics will be considered. Evidently, these elements are strongly interconnected among each other, and any attempt of distinction and isolation implies a certain degree of constrictiveness. Nonetheless, in order to provide the reader with a clear exposition, we decided to identify different sections and proceed with a “zoom movement”, starting from the analysis of the space of the eating place and the practices related to it (macro-level), to progressively approach the level of plates and food (micro-level), considered not only in their internal configuration but,

again, also—and above all—with respect to the “techniques of the body” and the practices of the subjects whose images they presuppose, but who at the same time modify them.

Before proceeding to the analysis, it is necessary to make a last consideration, which has partially already emerged in the previous, but seems to require a more explicit remark as we approach the domain of the spatial configuration and the other aspects related to it. Evidently, some of the elements that will be considered in the following depend on reasons of material nature or on other variables not directly related to the will or direct intentions of the providers of the eating experience. The structure of some restaurants, for instance, was set prior to their “Japanisation”³⁵—that is, the attempt of partially or totally convert them into Japanese restaurants—, somehow affecting their spatial configuration and the possibility to reshape it. Economic reasons or particular marketing strategies, as well as the presence and influence of larger or smaller Japanese communities in the considered foodspheres, could have also played their role in the arrangement of the spatial dimension and the definition of particular aspects. This highlights the need of avoiding extreme generalisations or interpreting what is contingent as necessary and unavoidably symptomatic. It is in this sense that the following considerations should be read, as they do not claim to be comprehensive nor compulsory, but rather to suggest some guidelines for the interpretation of the ethnic eating experience and the here considered processes of “translation” modifying it.

5.3.1 The Macro-Level: Eating Space, Visibility, and Hierarchy

The following paragraphs will focus on the analysis of the eating spatial text, considering both the dining room and its adjacent spaces (the entrance, the waiting room, the kitchen, etc.) at a *macro*-level. Before proceeding to the consideration of the different case studies, however, some crucial elements should be remarked:

³⁵ The expression *to Japanize* is here used in the sense reported by *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*: “to make or become Japanese in form, idiom, style, or character.” (www.thefreedictionary.com/Japanization) According to the common orthographic rules of British English, “z” was replaced by “s”.

first of all, the important role of the opposition continuous *vs.* discontinuous. Spatial discontinuity is crucial to build up any topological identity (Marrone 2005a, 4):

La prima categoria grazie alla quale lo spazio acquista una determinata significazione è senz'altro quella che oppone la percezione di una estensione (continua) alla percezione di una struttura (discontinua). È solo con la discontinuità, infatti, che il senso comincia a emergere, creando differenze tra luoghi e conseguentemente caricandoli di significato (Marrone 2001, 329).

(The first category through which space acquires a particular meaning is undoubtedly the one opposing the perception of a (continuous) extension to the perception of a (discontinuous) structure. Only with discontinuity, in fact, sense begins to emerge, creating differences among places and consequently investing them of meaning [translation mine]).

The division of space into spheres requiring different behaviours and imposing limits and rules of conduct makes people aware not only of their bodies and their faculty to act in the surrounding environment (Cervelli and Sedda 2006, 172), but also of the parameters underlying the attribution of meanings and values. The category continuous/discontinuous will therefore play a crucial role in the upcoming analysis, together with other semantic oppositions like internal *vs.* external, closed *vs.* open, central *vs.* peripheral, enclosed *vs.* enclosing, empty *vs.* full, and all the other elements highlighted so far.

Finally, it is necessary to point out that, following in Lévi-Strauss' (1949) and Marrone's (2001) footsteps, the spatial system will be conceived as the level of expression, while the narrative programs taking place (with respect to the enunciated, the enunciation, and the social subjects) within it will be referred to

the level of content. Such a perspective is very useful as it allows us to consider both the textual dimension and practices in a systematic way, keeping the “zoom” movement described before.

5.3.1.1 Arcadia

As regards to Arcadia, the first element to point out with respect to the spatial dimension is the sign of the restaurant: we analysed in the previous its configuration and meanings,³⁶ but it is essential to remark its strategical location, as it dominates the main entrance. Even before accessing the restaurant, the Subject receives information about its double nature in the heterotopical space.



Figure 52 – Entrance, Arcadia.

Unlike the image used on the website (Fig. 29), the cardboard structure occupying the entrance of the restaurant (Fig. 52) represents the Japanese woman on the left, echoing a series of floral paintings on the wall, and the Italian chef on the right, in rhyme with the cuckoo clocks on the right-hand wall. Moreover, whereas the Italian cook welcoming guests in

³⁶ Cf. §5.1.

correspondence with the door sustains an information plaque reporting the names of the latest local food entries on the menu, the Japanese silhouette, in a farer position with respect to the door, holds a series of plastic models illustrating the nature of sushi, functioning not only as an information device but as a real explicative tool.

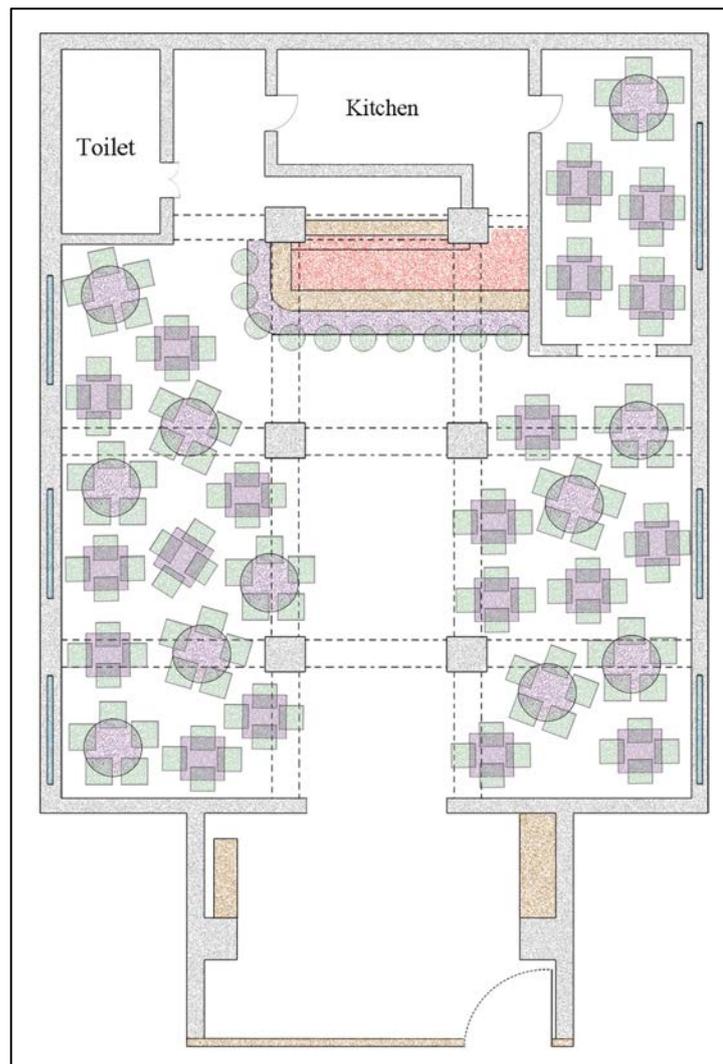


Figure 53 – Planimetry of Arcadia.

After having crossed the first wrapping layer of the door (which is almost completely penetrable by sight due to its transparency), customers pass

through the initial aisle (the second layer, where they are unwrapped of their coats—if wearing them—by waiters), and finally enter a very large room (Fig. 54), characterised by high and imposing arches (whose form—as mentioned in the previous—is recalled by the visual configuration of the menu) in Piedmontese noble style, echoing the location of the restaurant (which is placed in the “Galleria Romano”, at the “heart” of the so-called “Royal area” of Turin, close to Piazza Castello, Palazzo Madama, Palazzo Reale, and the famous Regio Theatre). Other items such as the awnings, the chairs, the lighting system, and the preparation of the tables are characterised by sumptuousness and elegance too, further stressing the importance of local taste. On the other hand, such configuration is broken by the element located at the end of the room, the sushi bar (Figs. 55 and 56), whose presence is remarked by a big neon sign (Fig. 57) standing above it—which is significantly partially covered by a red curtain recalling the other awnings and the typical interior design of the eating place.



Figure 54 – Main Dining Room, Arcadia (© Arcadia).



Figure 55– Sushi Bar, Arcadia.



Figure 56– Sushi Bar, Arcadia.



Figures 57 and 58– Sushi Bar Arch (left) and Japanese Painting (right), Arcadia.

Here the traditional circular and square tables disappear, replaced by a large wooden counter placed around a platform where some Asian³⁷ chefs prepare various dishes using the fish stored in a transparent window between them and the diners. More high stools substitute the chairs and the spatial configuration seems to partially separate the sushi zone from the surrounding environment: customers sitting at the counter turn their back on people eating at the tables, and the absence of seats in a frontal position promotes their “communication” with food and the practices of preparation of food rather than facilitating the visual contact with other diners. Moreover, the presence of elements typical of the Eastern semiosphere (the lamp and the noren in Fig. 55, the parchment recalling the Japanese art of *Shodō* in Fig. 56, and the wall painting portraying a Japanese woman in Fig. 58), whose dimensions and position make them visible only as the customer gets closer to the sushi bar, remaining almost indiscernible from other points of view (e.g. Fig. 54), contributes to highlight such distinction. Finally, the presence of cooks working just in front of customers establishes a crucial difference between the two areas: while eating at the table implies the impossibility to access to the practices of preparation of food, either in the case of local cuisine (confined to the sphere of the kitchen) or Japanese plates (which are prepared at the sushi bar and then brought to the tables by waiters), sitting at the sushi bar allows people to look at chefs working, although—as mentioned in the desk analysis—some practices (peeling, skinning, frying, etc.) remained limited to the unseen space of kitchen.

On the other hand, continuity between the two zones is assured not only at the level of the enunciated, with the absence of physical—i.e. doors or dividing screens³⁸—or any other immaterial—i.e. related to the lighting system or the auditory environment—barrier, but also at the level of social

³⁷ But not necessarily Japanese; at the moment of the analysis, for instance, cooks from Japan, but also from other Asian countries were working at the restaurant.

³⁸ Which separate the dining space from the kitchen and the toilet, but do not mark any point of discontinuity within it.

actors, with the same waiters welcoming guests as they entered the restaurant and interacting with them both at the tables and the sushi bar. However, a crucial element intervenes in the utopian space depending on the place where the performance of the Subject takes place. People eating at the tables cannot go along with their narrative programs without the intermediation of waiters, who establish the necessary communication between them and cooks. By contrast, eaters sitting at the sushi bar, although accompanied to the counter by the same waiters and firstly asked by them for what they want to drink, then directly get in contact with the chefs not only at a visual level, but also for what concerns practices. After being invited to a small appetizer, they are provided with the competence of directly ordering the plates through the chefs, eventually contacting them for any doubt or comment.

Finally, it is interesting to remark the absence of any barrier between the area of the sushi bar and the kitchen: although not visible to diners because of the small corridor, continuity is crucial as it highlights the proximity of people choosing the sushi option to the *oku* of the restaurant, which significantly represents the farthest point with respect to the entrance. Nonetheless, the level of practices contributes to redimension the centrality of the Japanese-marked space, insisting on the importance of the local foodsphere-oriented area, already predominant at the level of the enunciated:³⁹ while sitting at the traditional circular and square tables requires customers to make a reservation in advance—either they want to consume local food or a Japanese meal—, thus bringing forward the moment of manipulation, access to the sushi bar is not regulated by any previous formal contract, but is managed depending on the availability at the moment when people enter the restaurant. Moreover, guests who, not knowing about the possibility of having the sushi experience, made a reservation for the tables can change for it after entering the restaurant,

³⁹ With 125 seats vs. 10 sushi bar stools.

always depending on availability. This is particularly interesting, as it suggests that Subjects are not required to have any particular previous competence (*knowing-how-to-do*) to access the ethnic eating experience, thanks to the extremely balanced and versatile double nature of the dining place.

5.3.1.2 Wasabi

Unlike Arcadia, Wasabi tries to exhibit its “Japanese soul” since the beginning of the eating experience, through the logo appearing on the entrance door (Fig. 59): just as on the sign of the service standing over the door (Fig. 30), Japanese characters dominate the glass along with the transliterated form “WASABI”, name both of the restaurant and of one of the most representative elements of the Japanese foodsphere. Nonetheless, as mentioned in the brief description of the restaurant and its logo,⁴⁰ the need for transliteration is a first indicator of the importance of “translation” processes, which could not be avoided nor completely concealed.



Figure 59 – Entrance, Wasabi.

⁴⁰ Cf. §3.2.1.

The transparency of the door, moreover, allows the new comer to glimpse the “typically” Japanese characterisation of the restaurant (with walls, divisors, and pieces of furniture made of rice paper and wood), as well as an interesting tension between dark and light elements (whose importance in the Japanese eating experience was described in the opening of Chapter 4⁴¹).

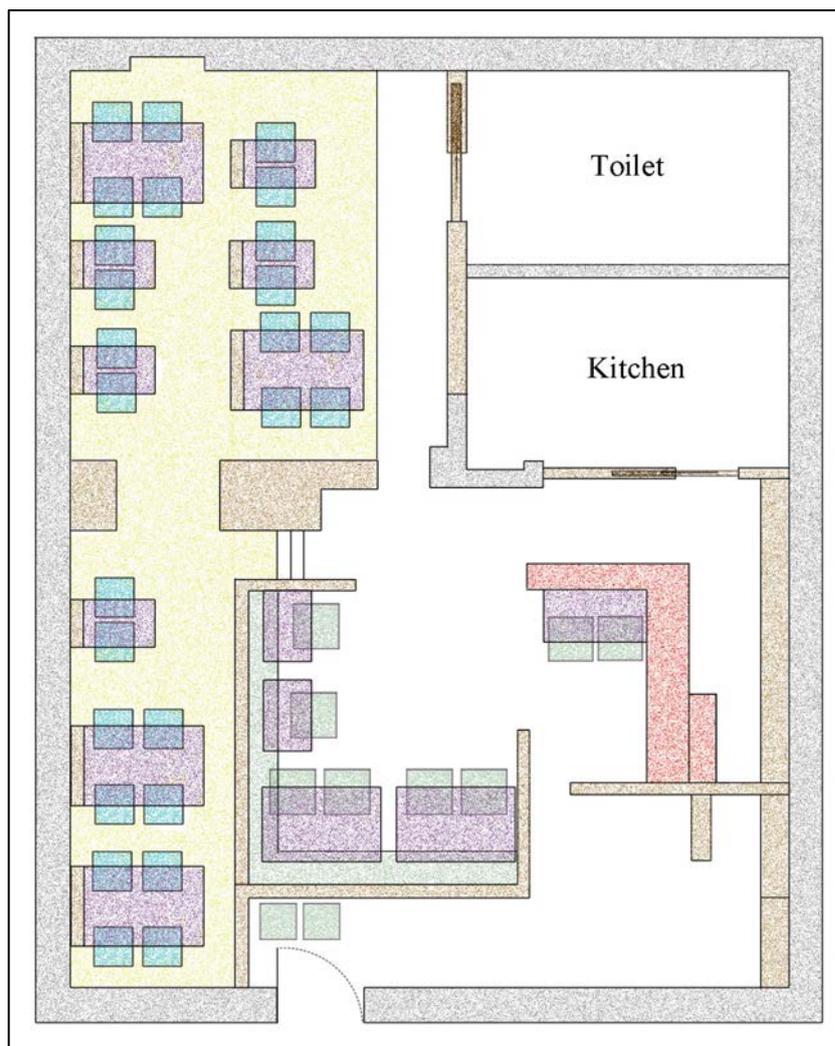


Figure 60 – Planimetry of Wasabi.

⁴¹ Cf. §4.1.

Looking at the planimetry of the eating place (Fig. 60), it is remarkable the division of its interior into different areas: after passing through a small aisle and an entrance room where customers are unwrapped of their coats, a Japanese kimono-wearing waiter brings the guests to the dining zone, which is characterised by the presence of two very different spaces. The first area, enclosed by wooden walls, includes some tables with chairs or benches to sit on, placed on common dark tiles. Close to one of the wooden divisors enclosing this space, some stairs allow customers to access, after having removed their shoes, to the so-called “*tatami* room”, characterised by the traditional Japanese mat made of a core of rice straw⁴² and a covering of pressed woven soft rush (*igusa*) straw. Here the tables, while maintaining the same decoration and visual configuration of those located in the other room, do not lean on the floor, but form part of dark wooden structures hanging on the wall and connecting them to upper lighting panels (Fig. 61).



Figure 61 – Dining rooms, Wasabi (© Wasabi).

⁴² Even though nowadays wood chip boards or polystyrene foam are more used, especially outside Japan.

Some wooden chairs (seat and back only, no legs—cf. the light blue squares in Fig. 60 and Fig. 62) directly laying on the tatami replace the Western-style seats (chairs and benches) of the other room. Nonetheless, unlike the common Japanese tatamis, which require users to cross their legs and seat on the mat—or at most on opportunely disposed seating elements—the floor used at Wasabi is not flat, including lowered empty spaces beneath—and mostly hidden by—the tables where people can place their legs, as if they were sitting on common Western seats (Fig. 62). Although shifting from the enunciational dimension to the actual use of space by social actors we noticed forms of resemantisation neglecting such recesses—with people crossing their legs as if there was not any lowered empty space—, their presence is a clear indicator of a process of “translation” and cannot be ignored.



Figure 62 – Tatami seats, Wasabi.

In semiotic terms, the area including the door and the aisle can be conceived as the heterotopical space, where manipulation takes place, expressing customers’ wish (*wanting-to-do*) of having a Japanese eating experience and their need (*having-to-do*) of opening the door and go beyond the two seats—which could be used to wait other possible late-coming diners—standing just behind it in order to proceed with their narrative program. A more variable configuration characterises the paratopical space

and the acquisition of the prerequisites for the performance-meal (the competence): the Receiver/Subject—the customer, either local or Japanese, or even coming from another country—is asked by the Sender/Manipulator—the waiter, who should be necessarily Japanese (Fig. 63), according to the restaurant etiquette—to get unwrapped of the external layers covering his/her body in order to access the inner layers of the restaurant itself. He/she can then actually realise the action of eating in the first dining room, connoting it as the utopian space, or rather proceeding to the tatami room (the second utopian space, located in a more inner—or “wrapped”, we could say—position with respect to the entrance),⁴³ with the first dining room becoming part of the paratopical space where the Subject is required to acquire another competence, consisting of getting unwrapped of a second layer covering his/her body—the shoes.



Figure 63 – A Japanese waiter welcoming costumers, Wasabi.

⁴³ Due to the large demand, this area is generally accessible only by making a reservation in advance. This requires customers to have a certain knowledge of the place, as they have to voluntarily specify they want to sit in the tatami zone when calling, otherwise they will be allocated in the other room, whose demand is generally lower.

Such movement of parallel unwrapping—of body and space—finds its symmetrical counterpart at the end of the eating experience, when customers leave the place of the performance and the sanction—which will be considered hereinafter—and *re*-get wrapped (first of their shoes, and finally of their coat) as they leave the inner parts of the dining place, getting closer to the external ones and, finally, to the door, whose transparency reveals no more the Japanese soul of the inside, but rather the local characterisation of the outside. It is also interesting that, in the case of consumers eating in the tatami room and needing to go to the toilet, a partial re-wrapping is required. In order to access the restroom, which is separated from the matted area by a central tiled corridor, people should get down the steps marking the border between the two rooms and wear the Japanese communal clogs (Fig. 64) at their bottom to walk through the aisle and get to the more external spatial level.



Figure 64 – Communal Japanese clogs, Wasabi.

As regards to the performance, an accurate and complete analysis requires to focus on different spatial levels—including the table and the plate—, which will be analysed in the following. At the macro-level, it is essential to remark the importance of *visibility*: crucial element for *washoku*, as discussed above, it changes depending on the room where eaters find

themselves in. The kitchen is totally inaccessible to customers, who cannot neither enter nor see it: the only point breaking the continuity of its totally opaque boundary (made of wood and concrete) is the door, which, albeit consisting in a sliding structure, does not open on one of dining room, but leads into the sushi counter,⁴⁴ that is, the partially visible area where cooks generally prepare sushi (Fig. 65). Such area is the only space where the practices of preparation can be partially seen, always according to the common relation between showing and concealing dynamics analysed in §4.3.1.



Figure 65 – Sushi bar and kitchen entry, Wasabi.

The continuity brought by the presence of a sliding door seems to reinforce the link between the two areas, although the positioning of the barrier in a point that makes the interior visually inaccessible even to the small table just in front of the sushi counter highlights the importance of discontinuity, opposing the two spaces in terms of accessibility *vs.* inaccessibility, openness *vs.* closeness, and interiority *vs.* exteriority. This

⁴⁴ The expression “sushi bar” is avoided here because between the surface where cooks prepare sushi and the hypothetical axis tracing the height of consumers’ sight there is a high wooden structure preventing people to look at practices of preparation of food (Fig. 65). Such configuration will be further analysed in the following.

contributes to define the kitchen as the impenetrable *oku* of the building, while the sushi zone would rather respond to the purpose of *showing*—or, better, *not concealing*—, with important implications on the configuration of the places where the Subject realises the action of eating: the dining rooms. Proximity to the sushi counter seems to oppose to its visual accessibility, making the system of vision more structured compared to the previously analysed case. Building on Fontanille’s model for the analysis of the space modalized by the “observer” and the “informer” (1987; 1989; Fig. 66), it could be argued that the small table with two chairs adjacent to the bar corresponds to *inaccessibility*,⁴⁵ as it does not allow costumers to look at the cook(s) preparing sushi, because of the high vertical wooden structure separating them and impeding the look.

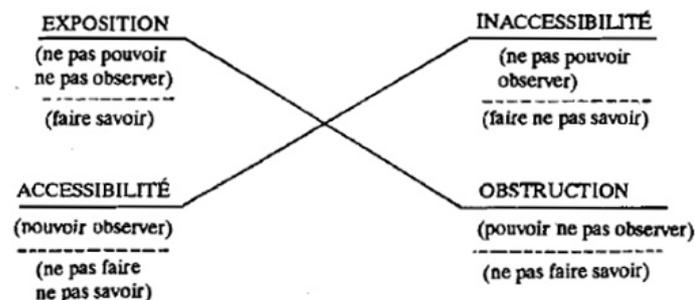


Figure 66 – Model for the analysis of the space modalized by the “observer” and the “informer” (Fontanille 1987, 187; 1989, 54).

The first dining room would be instead characterised by *obstruction*, as for people sitting in it the practices of preparation of sushi would be easier to look at compared to those staying at the small table, but still remain hardly visible, incomplete, and not entirely detectable.⁴⁶ Finally, while *exposition*⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Characterising what refuses to show itself to the observer (“l’*inaccessibilité* caractérise [...] ce que se refuse à l’observateur, comme par exemple ce qui se trouve hors des limites latérales du champ de vision”, Fontanille 1989, 54).

⁴⁶ “L’*obstruction* caractérise tout ce qui est masqué, difficilement saisissable, incomplet, ou peu reconnaissable, comme négation de l’exposition” (Fontanille 1988, 54).

is not possible, as only staff members are allowed to go beyond the high vertical structure of the counter, *accessibility* would characterise exclusively some of the tables in the tatami room, which are located in a higher position with respect to the counter, thus making eaters able to glimpse and perceive⁴⁸ the considered practices.

As a consequence, we can conclude that the opposition *centre/periphery* is not related, in this case, to a longitudinal or horizontal development (as the *oku* does not occupy the actual centre of the structure⁴⁹), but rather to a vertical axis (with the *low* corresponding to the most peripheral areas and the *high* denoting the proximity of elements to the centre). This adds an interesting element to the analysis of the configuration of the tatami zone, suggesting that its superelevated position is not merely related to functional aspects—creating the space for the lowered recesses where people can place their legs—, embracing semantic oppositions that cannot be neglected.

By contrast, it should be remembered that the *oku* of the building, the kitchen, is not positioned in a higher or lower position compared to the other rooms, which makes it impossible to assume the opposition high/low as a general statement, requiring to firstly consider the opposition accessible/inaccessible. On the other hand, building on this observation, it is remarkable that, as regards to the kitchen, the vertical axis seems somehow to refer to another, immaterial dimension. A sort of subordination of people consuming food to people preparing and serving it, whose “higher” position or role would allow them to access the most hidden and internal space of the eating experience, is established, echoing the importance of *hierarchy* in the Japanese semiosphere (cf. Benedict 1946 [1978], 55–56; Argyle 1975 [1976], 88; Hendry 1993 [1995], 99).

⁴⁷ Corresponding to what can be seen by the observer (“*l’exposition* caractérise tout ce qui, dans l’énoncé, se donne à voir à l’observateur”, Fontanille 1988, 54).

⁴⁸ “L’*accessibilité* caractérise tout ce qui se laisse apercevoir, entrevoir, toute faille dans l’obstacle, qui recule les limites du champ visuel (miroirs, reflets, portes ou tentures ouvertes, etc.)”, Fontanille 1988, 54.

⁴⁹ Coinciding instead with a transitional and somehow “empty” zone.

5.3.1.3 Guu Izakaya

In the case of *Guu Izakaya*, the “wrapping principle” seems to become even more evident, embracing also the space outside the restaurant.



Figure 67 – Planimetry of Guu Izakaya.

As showed by the planimetry of the eating place (Fig. 67), two main areas can be identified according to the category *outside/inside*: an external patio (on the right), whose material structure and visual configuration create a rhyme with the hedge facing it and lying close to a concrete bench—which, in turn, recalls the walls of the building—, thus identifying a second outside area, used by customers waiting to enter the restaurant; and a big, internal room (on the left), subdivided into two partitions by a glass barrier (broken line in Fig. 67) and some stairs. The small, slightly higher zone between the main dining room and the outside terrace is therefore identifiable as a sort of intermediary zone, whose proximity to the inside,

however, is clearly marked by the different nature of its borders: transparent glasses suggesting the continuity between it and the other inner partition, on one side; and an opaque wall, on the other side, with just a sliding door and a window—visually and physically—breaking the discontinuity with the patio. Furthermore, although embracing elements which do not pertain to the Japanese tradition—such as the design of the lighting system, or the coat rack, etc.—, the inside is characterised by the presence of different elements recalling the Far Eastern semiosphere—e.g. the feeble lighting, the large use of wood, particular drawings and paintings, etc. By contrast, the patio, albeit maintaining Japanese-style tables and seats, overlooks the local reality, opening to the visual interaction with the surrounding environment.



Figure 68 – Guu Izakaya from the outside (© Guu Izakaya).

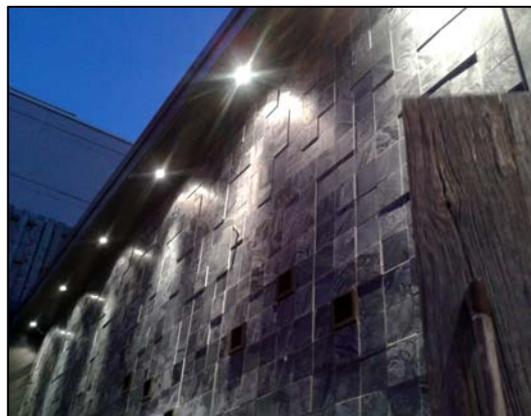


Figure 69 – Main door, Guu Izakaya.

While the external area is partially visible by people waiting for entering the restaurant—who, upon arrival, should leave their contacts to the waiter standing at the door and then sit on the external bench and wait to be called by him—, the internal rooms are completely imperceptible from the outside, because of the discontinuity of the wall, whose almost complete impenetrability is enhanced by the presence of very small square windows that, albeit letting the external light seeping through them, are completely opaque from the outside, and a huge wooden swing door that can be—and is generally just partially—opened only by the waiter (Figs. 68 and 69). The diversity between the two layers “wrapping” the internal zone and the patio, characterised by a different degree of penetrability, is further enhanced by their chromatic configuration, with the cold colours of the stones and concrete of the wall opposing to the warm colours of the wooden fence.



Figure 70 – Main dining room, Guu Izakaya (© Guu Izakaya).



Figure 71 – Dining rooms, Guu Izakaya (© Guu Izakaya).



Figure 72 – The counter looking on to the kitchen, Guu Izakaya.

With manipulation, the Subject is allowed to cross the impenetrable border of the wall and access the internal area (Figs. 70 and 71), with a series of important implications. First of all, the same barrier loses part of its impenetrability, as the external light seeps now through the small square windows that become therefore semi-transparent. Secondly, but more importantly, if on the outside, discontinuity (e.g. the wooden fence delimiting the patio, the sliding doors and the window connecting it to the internal room) was related to *accessibility*, on the inside, visibility is brought to its maximum degree (*exposition*) through continuity. Once entered through the main door, the Subject finds himself in the main dining room, where there are four big tables with benches and seats and two counters with

stools facing the drink bar (on the left) and the kitchen (at the bottom of the room). In this case, therefore, those standing at the counter looking on to the kitchen (the “heart” of the building, as remarked also by the use of lighting,⁵⁰ Figs. 71 and 72) are *exposed* to the practices of preparation of food, as well as to the other elements of the eating experience, opposing to those waiting outside the door, whose sight is obstructed by the visually impenetrable barrier of the wall. Customers eating at the tables, instead, are characterised by *accessibility*, with proximity going along with visibility: as people sit closer to the kitchen they can perceive better the practices carried out in such space, according to a logic *centre/periphery*,⁵¹ and with no big difference related to the opposition *high/low*.⁵² It is also remarkable that a very few seats and stools are positioned in an opposite direction relative to the *oku* of the restaurant, requiring people to turn or move to look at it. In these cases, moreover, most of the pews face the drink bar, which somehow counterbalances the partial loss of sight with the view of the practices of preparation of cocktails.⁵³ Finally, it should be noticed that, from such a perspective, the patio is connoted by *inaccessibility*, as it does not allow costumers to look at the cooks preparing food, because of the wall separating it from the inside, whose impenetrability is broken just by a sliding door and a window. Therefore, it becomes evident that, if from the outside, the partially wrapped components of the spatial dimension are characterised by accessibility, while the completely wrapped zone implies obstruction, from the inside such configuration radically changes. Once found the way to go through the first layer, the main dining room becomes the space for accessibility (or even exposition) to the eating experience—and even its heart, coinciding with the practices of preparation of food—,

⁵⁰ With the dining rooms with a feebler light, and the kitchen more illuminated and bright thanks to the system of lighting and the presence of reflecting surfaces.

⁵¹ Even though it develops just on one side, while the other one is interrupted by the wall delimiting the restaurant.

⁵² Only one step separates the main room from the higher smaller partition on the right.

⁵³ Which play an important role within the menu of the restaurant, cf. §5.2.3.

whereas the patio does not show but a few elements to the Subject. In this sense, the use of transparent barriers and the presence of an open space in correspondence to the stair separating the two internal zones are particularly significant, as they mark a subdivision but at the same time establish a continuous flux between them.

But how to go through the first, impenetrable layer? In order to do so, the Subject should establish an explicit contract with the Sender-Manipulator, as he is the only one who can provide him with the competence (*being-able-to-do*) necessary to access the eating experience, both visually—with the exception of the partial accessibility offered by the patio—and practically. Heterotopical and paratopical space therefore partially coincide, as the Subject has not only to contact (*having to do*) the waiter at the door and ask him for being seated, but he has also to *know* that he has to do it and he has to *know* in advance and without any additional information whether he would like to sit in the patio⁵⁴ or inside (either at the counter or at the tables).⁵⁵ The acquisition of the competence thus rely on the *encyclopaedia* of the customer, that is a competence (*knowing how to do*) previously acquired on the base of past experiences, other people's recommendations, or other sources of information.⁵⁶ Moreover, strong emphasis is put on the hierarchical roles related to the eating experience: although knowing how to cross the external layer wrapping the restaurant, Subjects can do it (*be able to do*) only after having established a contract with the Sender-Manipulator (by getting in touch with him and leaving him their contacts) and having received his permission to cross the border.

Finally, while in other analysed examples the unwrapping of space is related to that of the body, in this case there is no formalised relation

⁵⁴ According to the most common Canadian habits (when appropriate).

⁵⁵ In the case of online or phone reservations, which can be made only at the first seating at 5pm on Friday and Saturday, or during 5pm and 10pm on Sunday to Thursday, and should respect a precise set of rules (cf. <http://guu-izakaya.com/reservation#churchR>), no preference can be expressed for the seating.

⁵⁶ Without any specification on the website.

between them: when entering the restaurant, the Model User should get unwrapped of his/her coat and leave it on the rack just in front of the door, as most of the seat have no a seatback to hang it onto. Nonetheless, no waiter formally asks the Empirical User to do it, so that he/she could even decide to keep it with him/her, as it is sometimes the case. Moreover, it is interesting to notice that in the case of people eating in the patio, the process of unwrapping would be generally followed by a successive re-wrapping, which generally lead them not to get unwrapped but rather to rapidly go through the interior space to get to the external zone they want to reach.

To conclude, mention should be made to the fact that, unlike other examples (e.g. Wasabi), no further unwrapping of the body is here requested as the Subject goes through the layers of the spatial dimension: not including any tatami zone, Guu Izakaya does not require customers to take their shoes off, thus perfectly responding to the common Canadian opposition between *private* (where they should be taken off) and *public* spaces (where they are generally kept on).

5.3.1.4 Shinobu

As it can be observed in Fig. 73, in the case of Shinobu the spatial dimension has a longitudinal development, with the most external layer on one end and the most internal one to the other extremity.

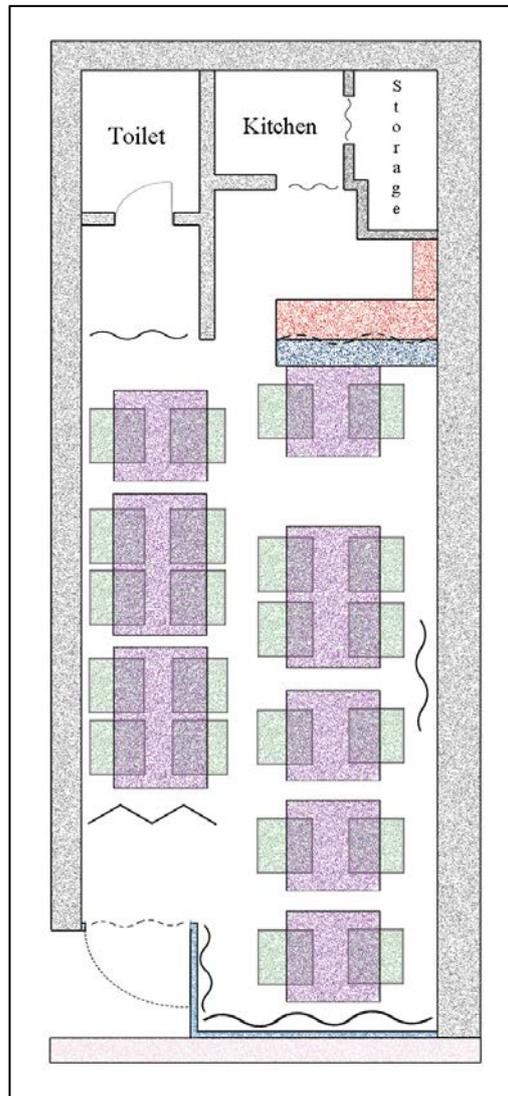


Figure 73 – Planimetry of Shinobu.

More precisely, such structure seems to perfectly embody the so-called “wrapping principle”: people walking along the street can notice the presence of the restaurant because of its big sign (Fig. 74; cf. also the pink rectangle in Fig. 73), located just above the big window and the entrance facing the street.



Figure 74 – Sign and façade, Shinobu.

The first layer to be crossed is therefore immaterial: in order to enter the restaurant, the customer has first of all to abandon the continuous flux of his linear movement along the long sidewalk of Yonge Street—where different eating places and other services are located one after the other—, crossing the invisible barrier—in correspondence with the sign—that allows him to access the nook where the entrance of the building is located (Fig. 74). Here an interesting play of opacities and transparencies characterises the heterotopical space: the continuity brought by the glasses—still identifiable in their upper part, just below the sign—is broken by opaque awnings in the case of the big façade overlooking the street and the smaller barrier delimiting the nook on the right side. This contributes to create the second layer wrapping the restaurant, which is of visual nature: the discontinuity impeding people to see inside. The attention therefore moves to the door, whose mobility creates the conditions for the establishment of the contract, opening the way to the development of eating experience. Even before this step, however, another element calls to Subjects: the frame appearing on the nook, containing a restaurant review appeared on a newspaper (Fig. 75).

Such characterisation of the spatial dimension, which becomes particularly evident due to the chromatic contrast between the white curtain and the red frame, is remarkable as it gives information about the Sender/Manipulator. Although the Subject/Receiver cannot see inside the restaurant, a formal sanction—deriving from a previous narrative program identifying the cook, and more generally the eating experience offered by Shinobu, as the Subject, and presuming a second-level Sender called to judge its performance—certifies the success and quality of his Sender, echoing the statement of the sign (“*Authentic Japanese Restaurant*”, italics mine).



Figure 75 – Restaurant review, Shinobu.

Crossed the first layer and taken cognizance of what enunciated by the second one, the Subject can therefore decide to go back and opt for another narrative program, or rather to proceed beyond the second layer, opening the door (Fig. 76) and establishing the contract with the Sender.



Figure 76 – Entrance, Shinobu.

In this sense, the configuration of the door plays a central role: breaking the *obstruction* of the other barriers dividing the inside and the outside, it provides the Subject with a series of overlapping but partial divisors—the *noren*⁵⁷ instead of the long curtains, the semi-opaqueness of the screen made of rice paper and wood, the space between them, etc.—creating the space for a certain degree of visual penetrability and suggesting the idea of a potential, although just very partially perceptible, openness. To make such potentiality real, the Subject should open the door (Fig. 76) and cross the partial layer of the *noren*, accessing the paratopical space of the entrance, created by a movable shield—which, although further breaking the obstruction typical of the outside, still makes the spatial dimension *inaccessible* to the customer’s view. It is just with the first contact with the waiter, and her permission to go beyond the screen that the Subject can access the dining room and finally reach the utopian space where his performance will take place. Such space is characterised by a longitudinal development, which further enhances the so far analysed “wrapping structure”: eight tables arranged in two lines precedes an area in its turn wrapped by different complete or partial covering layers. If on the left a complete but easily removable barrier—a

⁵⁷ Which, in Fig. 73, was represented by a dotted line in order to highlight that it just partially covers the glass of the door.

long, black awning—makes inaccessible the aisle conducting to the toilet, on the right different overlapping layers covering different portions of space create a particular tension between accessibility and inaccessibility. Specifically, some tools or ingredients used for the preparation of food are accessible to the Subject (Fig. 77), along with a small glass case predisposed for the display of sushi,⁵⁸ as the short curtains standing above them do not cover them. On the contrary, the kitchen is covered by a semi-opaque long red awning, which lets glimpse the presence of some tools, although not making them identifiable, and make the movements of the cook perceptible, though not recognisable.



Figure 77 – Counter and kitchen, Shinobu.

The wrapping principle seems therefore dominating the spatial dimension from the very external zone surrounding the restaurant to its *oku*, which consists again in the kitchen, that is the space where the practices of preparation take place. No seat, moreover, is directly oriented toward the kitchen, but people are disposed edgewise with respect to it, so that proximity plays certainly a central role, but the look is always a sideways look. Again, a hierarchical configuration becomes evident: while guests can

⁵⁸ Which, however, was never used during the period of observation.

at most perceive the spatial heart of the restaurant, the cook has complete access to it, thanks to his skills and the role he plays in the eating experience. A third figure, the waiter, incessantly crosses the borders between these two spaces and conditions, making them communicate through the plates she asks (to the cook) and serves (to the customers) and her same person. She is therefore characterised by a *transitional* position and an *intermediate* position between the two poles of the Subject-Customer and the Sender-Cook.

Finally, it should be observed that, if at the level of the enunciated, this structure is characterised by an articulated and fixed set of rules, at the level of the enunciation it assumes a more open and variable configuration: for example, there are no spaces predisposed for the unwrapping of the body, but people should hang their coat directly onto the seatback and should not remove their shoes. Moreover, seats cannot be pre-assigned, but are distributed at the moment depending on availability and the number of people sitting together.



Figure 78 – Curtains and decorative elements, Shinobu.

To conclude, it should be mentioned the presence of various decorative elements typical of the Japanese semiosphere (Fig. 78) insisting on the name of the restaurant—with the logo functioning as a mark of continuity between the border of the eating place, the dining room, and the *oku*-kitchen—and its

“authentic” nature, which is kept separated from the external reality by that same isolating layer preventing to look inside from the outside.

5.3.1.5 Ginger

The spatial configuration of Ginger is characterised by the presence of two dining rooms and a patio (Fig. 79).

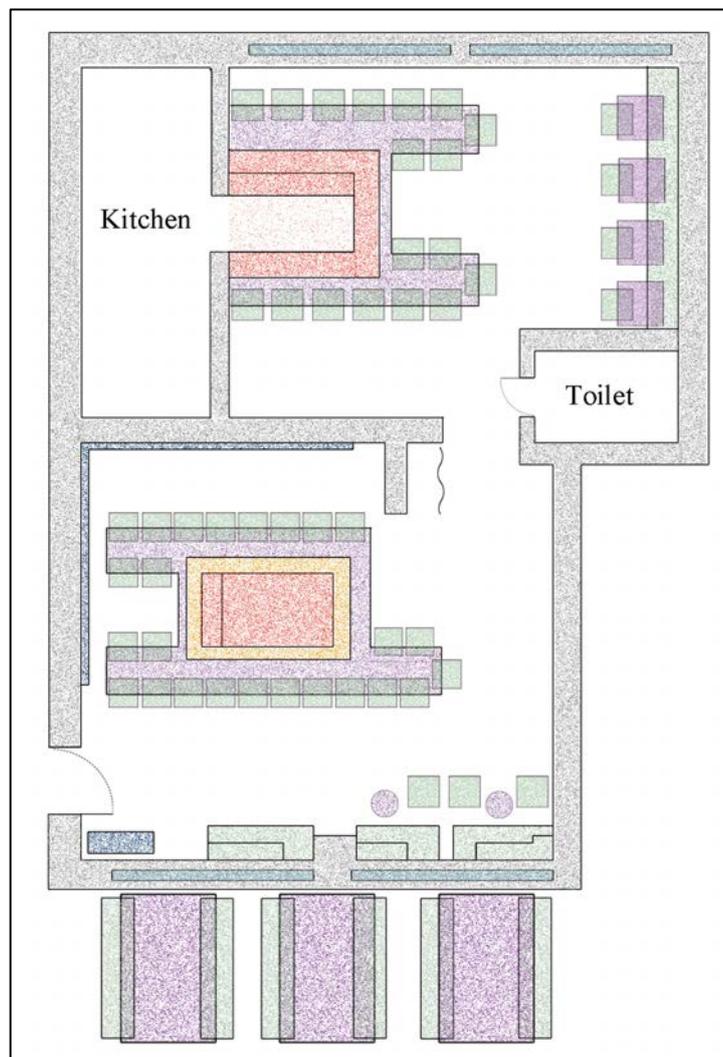


Figure 79 – Planimetry of Ginger.

First of all, it should be remarked the important role played by the encyclopaedia of the customer: due to the large demand, it is necessary to reserve in advance by phone. When doing so, consumers are asked for the room where they want to have dinner, without receiving any additional information—unless they explicitly ask for them, generally obtaining just a few hurried indications. More information are provided by the webpage, where two sections briefly describe the two internal rooms:

Sushi Bar: Before the eyes of the guests, in the center of the large bar, two Japanese chefs prepare sushi and other cold Japanese delicacies. The dishes are selected from the conveyor belt. There is no menu. (www.ginger-restaurant.ch/en/sushi-bar.php)

A la Carte: In the extended part of our restaurant you can enjoy excellent cold and warm dishes of high-end Japanese cuisine at beautifully set tables. Combine our extraordinary, delicious, different creations to a wonderful varied, individual, multi-course menu. (www.ginger-restaurant.ch/en/a-la-carte.php⁵⁹)

On the contrary, no mention is made to the patio (Fig. 80), used only when the weather makes it possible. Responding more to the local habits than to the search of an authentic Japanese experience, the external area is nonetheless characterised by some elements recalling the Far Eastern semiosphere, such as the large use of wood and the visual configuration of the small lanterns on the tables. Moreover, two big windows, where no curtains or screens obstruct the look in any way, break discontinuity with the inside (Figs. 80 and 81).

⁵⁹ In the same section, moreover, the customer can download the menu analysed in §3.2.2.5.



Figure 80 – Patio (winter), Ginger.

The external area is completely immersed in the surrounding environment, which visually reaches even the inner sushi room, because of the complete transparency of the windows.



Figure 81 – Sushi room corner, Ginger.

Before proceeding with the analysis of the internal space, however, a last consideration about the patio should be made: although the external area

generally represents the heterotopical space, in this case it can also represent the utopian space. This is possible when it gets in touch with the inside, through the same customer: it is only with the crossing of the layer of the door and the first contact with the waiters (manipulation) that the Subject is assigned a particular seat (competence) outside and can therefore proceed to his performance in such space.



Figure 82 – Sushi bar, Ginger (© Ginger).



Figure 83 – Sushi bar (night), Ginger.

Moving inside the restaurant, the first room customers find themselves in is the “Sushi bar” (hereafter “C”), whose visual continuity with the outside—

as previously mentioned—is assured by the transparency of the big windows, which not only make the outdoor reality visible from the interior (Fig. 81), but also let the external light come inside, profoundly affecting the brightness of the room (Figs. 82 and 83). This draws the attention to an interesting aspect: if at lunch one of the most evident features characterising the room is the polychromy of seats—perfectly responding to the modern local-style taste for design—, reiterated by the lively colours of the fish in the small glass case, at dinner its peculiarity consists rather in the suffused atmosphere recalling the Japanese love for darkness well depicted by Tanizaki (1993).⁶⁰



**Figure 84 – Waiter’s area (on the left)
and aisle conducting to the second dining room (on the right), Ginger.**

A scarcely illuminated aisle (Fig. 84) connects this first room to a second one, the so-called “à la Carte” room (hereafter “D”, Figs. 85 and 86), where people can enjoy different plates chosen from the menu.

⁶⁰ Cf. §4.2.



Figure 85 – “A la Carte” room, right side, Ginger (© Ginger).



Figure 86 – “A la Carte” room, left side (night), Ginger.

The two rooms present a series of analogies and differences: first of all, in both cases some seats are placed around a wooden counter surrounding cooking platforms where customers can look at the practices of preparation of food. However, if in C all processes of preparation take place before the customer’s eyes⁶¹ (*exposition*), with just a small partially separated area for the operations of cleaning and storage of flatware realised by the waiters (Fig. 84), D includes two different spaces: a cooking platform and a kitchen.

⁶¹ Although always excluding the practices of peeling, skinning, etc. realised before the *time* of the dinner, and therefore concealed to customers.

While the latter maintains a certain degree of visibility, the former is marked by *inaccessibility*, as, although a few of its elements can be seen from the outside—due to the absence of any door or screen closing it—, the disposition of seats does not allow any customer to visually access it. Even with respect to the cooking platform, it should be said that in D larger and lower chairs substitute the stools used in C, transforming exposition into *accessibility*. Moreover, the right side of the room (Fig. 85) hosts four tables and different seats, causing a further estrangement from the practices of preparation of food, and rather suggesting a conception of the eating experience as primarily based on its consumption.⁶² This stresses the discrepancy with C, where, however, the sushi bar is complemented by two very small tables, which represent a second choice where people who have not reserved by phone may decide to seat as it is the only option they have to have dinner at the restaurant. Both the chromatic and the material configuration of this space create an evident rhyme between it and D, making it possible to consider it as a sort of dislocated annex or extension of the tables located in the right side of the other room.

Another element distinguishing the two rooms is the type of service they are provided with: whereas in D the common Western practice of asking drinks and food to waiters who deliver them to the different customers is observed, in the case of the sushi bar⁶³ the cooks directly position the just-made plates on an incessantly moving conveyor belt (Fig. 83), from which people can take the ones they want to eat. On the other hand, the intermediation of waiters is maintained as regards to the request and service of beverages and desserts, as well as the removal of empty plates. And no communication is established between the customer and the cooks, which highlights the difference between Ginger and the previously analysed case

⁶² Such idea will be reconsidered in the following, when dealing with commensality and the spatial configuration of the table (cf. §5.3.2.5).

⁶³ Excluding the previously mentioned small tables near the windows, which are characterised by the same service of D.

of Arcadia, pointing out that exposition to the practices of preparation of food does not necessarily imply “communication” or interaction among social actors. Finally, it should be noticed that the presence of the conveyor belt recalls the continuity of the Japanese meal, breaking the typical local syntagmatic and paradigmatic configurations characterising, instead, the other room.⁶⁴

5.3.1.6 Sansui

Even in the case of Sansui we find different dining rooms. Nonetheless, unlike the previously analysed cases, such rooms are not directly connected to each other, but are located in different buildings or, when forming part of the same structure, on different floors. For this reason, they will be analysed for separate in the following, while the patio (Fig. 87) will not be considered here in details, as it does not have any particular Japanese characterisation, being instead marked by a typical local-taste design.



Figure 87 – Patio, Sansui (© Sansui).

⁶⁴ As the presence and configuration of the menu prove, cf. §5.2.5.

Before proceeding with the analysis, however, it should be noticed that, in this case, the role played by customers' encyclopaedia is even more important than in the previously analysed cases as, when calling to make a reservation, people have to know exactly where they want to have their meal. Again, the website is essential in providing the basic information about the different rooms:

La salle "sushi" : Salle principale. Equipée d'un sushi bar, les poissons sont préparés sous vos yeux par nos cuisiniers.

La salle "yakiniiku" : Cette salle est équipée de tables avec grill et ventilation intégrés afin de déguster nos grillades et marmites (yakiniiku, sukiyaki) sans fumée et sans odeurs. Idéal pour vos banquets!

La salle tatami : Petite salle pour repas authentiques.

La terrasse : Nous possédons également une terrasse paisible à l'arrière cour. (www.sansui.ch)

(The "Sushi" Room: the main room. Equipped with a sushi bar, where fish is prepared before your eyes by our chefs.

The "Yakiniiku" Room: This room is equipped with tables and grill with integrated ventilation to taste our smokeless and odourless grilled and simmered meat (yakiniiku, sukiyaki). Ideal for banquets!

The Tatami room: Small room for authentic meals.

The Patio: We also have a quiet terrace in the backyard [translation mine]).

As it can be inferred from these brief descriptions of the rooms, they are classified according to the eating experience they provide the customer with and the spatial configuration characterising them.

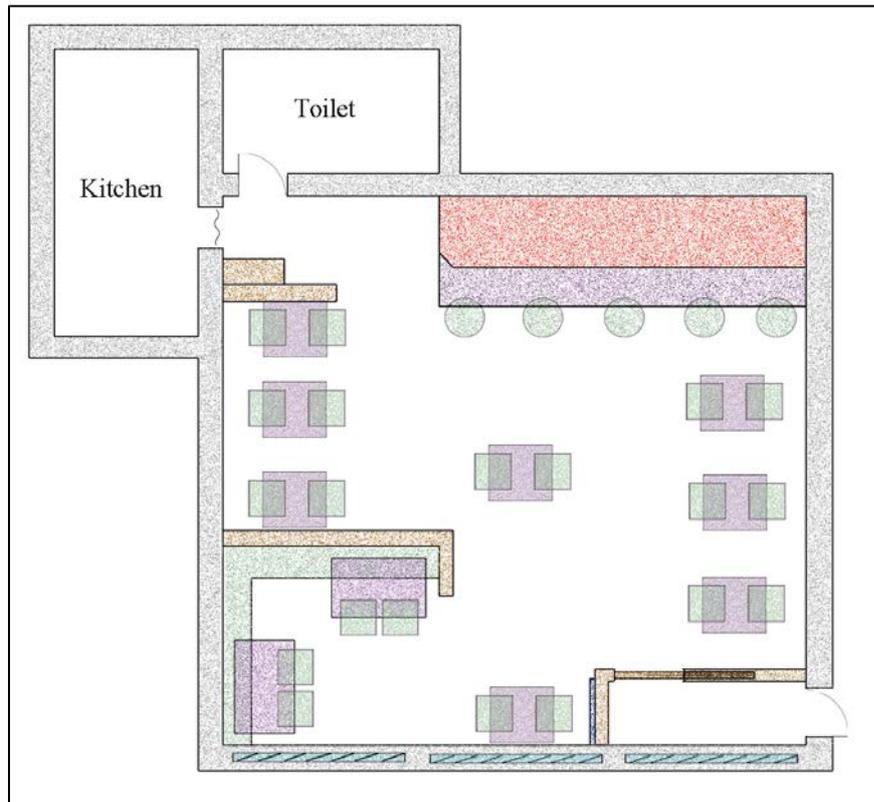


Figure 88 – Planimetry of Sansui, Sushi Room.

Since its description on the website, the “Sushi room” (Fig. 88) is marked by visibility: five stools overlooking the sushi bar (Fig. 89) *expose* customers to the practices of preparation of fish (“les poissons sont préparés *sous vos yeux* par nos cuisiniers”, italics mine), while people at the other tables have a partial *accessibility* to them, depending on where they are sitting. However, it should be remarked the presence of a separate area characterised by *inaccessibility*, because of the wooden wall partially “wrapping” it. Such difficulty to access the practices of preparation of food, by contrast, is somehow balanced by the large presence of refined elements,

such as floral paintings, masks, and other objects, recalling the Japanese semiosphere. Moreover, the absence of sharp caesuras between the different zones creates an effect of continuity along the room, further enhanced by the choice of using a sliding door with a large glass allowing the new comers to look inside (Fig. 90).



Figure 89 – Sushi Bar, Sansui (Sushi Room).



Figure 90 – Sliding door, Sansui (Sushi Room).

A more marked separation, on the contrary, characterises the first door (Fig. 91) connecting the initial aisle with the outside reality, thus connoting the

small corridor as a transitional area from a reality that must be kept separate through discontinuity—swing doors⁶⁵ and wooden gratings for the windows (Fig. 92)—to an internal area marked by continuity—sliding doors, open spaces, reduced awnings—as a means for visual accessibility.



Figure 91 – Outside door, Sansui (Sushi Room).



Figure 92 – Window, Sansui (Sushi Room).

⁶⁵ The one at the entrance, but also the one of the toilet.

It is also interesting to focus on the kitchen, the *oku* of the practices of preparation of food, which although not visible to customers, is not marked by obstruction, as in the previously analysed cases, but rather by inaccessibility, with partial awnings and the small counter of the cash register substituting the common door isolating it.

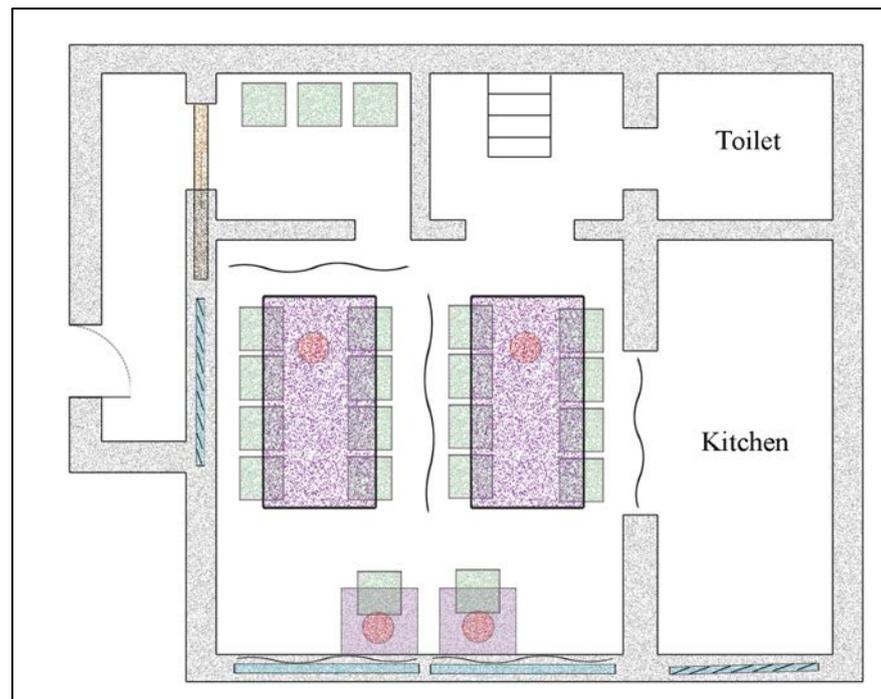


Figure 93 – Planimetry of Sansui, Yakiniku room.

The first element distinguishing the “Yakiniku room” (hereafter “F”, Fig. 93) from the “Sushi room” (“E”) can be noticed even from the outside, when walking along the external sidewalk connecting the two different adjacent buildings where they are located. The visual discontinuity characterising the passage from the inside to the outside reality (and vice versa) in E decreases, making the interior more visible through the adoption of semi-transparent awnings instead of wooden gratings (Fig. 94) and the positioning of the external door in correspondence with a window overlooking the dining room (Fig. 95).



Figure 94 – Window, Sansui (Yakiniku Room).



Figures 95 and 96 – External door (left) and kitchen window (right), Sansui (Yakiniku Room).

Inaccessibility is kept in the case of the kitchen, whose window is partially screened by a structure made of wood and rice paper (Fig. 96) preventing those who are outside to look inside. On the other hand, this is the only case where the spatial core of the practices of preparation of food is partially connected to the external reality. This could be related to the fact that, in this case, those same practices get out of the kitchen, making it loose its

functioning centrality. Although the very first steps of the transition from Nature to Culture take place there, the dining room becomes the space for the passage from the raw to the cooked, as customers are called to autonomously prepare their food using the grills at the centre of the table (cf. Fig. 94). A system of semi-transparent curtains therefore intervenes in separating the different tables, without establishing a system of rigid and complete discontinuity.

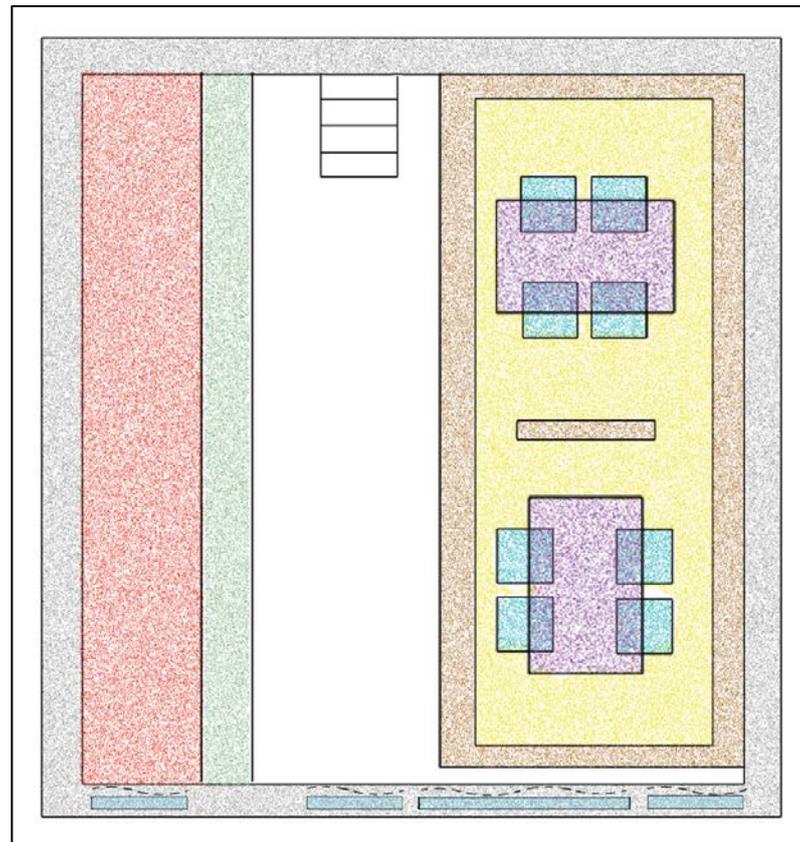


Figure 97 – Planimetry of Sansui, Tatami room.

Finally, the “Tatami room” (planimetry in Fig. 97), which is situated in the same building of the Yakiniku room, but on a different floor (with the first room functioning as a sort of layer through which one has to go in order

to get to it), is described as the space of “authenticity” (“petite salle pour repas *authentiques*”, italics mine).



Figure 98 – Tatami room, Sansui (© Sansui).



Figure 99 – Tatami room (window side), Sansui.

Here a simple and elegant wooden structure hosts the typical Japanese tatami, where a similar style wooden screen divides two black wooden tables and eight chairs (Fig. 98). A sharper caesura separates this area from the central corridor—lowered, tiled, and characterised by a colder tint—, while a chromatic rhyme and the use of the same types of wood adopted for both the base of the tatami zone and the seats connects it to the bar on the other side of the room. The latter represents also the place where the

practices of preparation of food become *accessible*, although not always easy to discern because of the height of the counter. Moreover, the major operations take place into the main kitchen at the upper floor, converting accessibility into obstruction. Authenticity thus seems to rely more on the conditions of consumption—the use of the tatami, which, in this case, does not include any lowered reduction, requesting its Model Customer to keep his/her legs crossed while sitting—than on the visual access of the processes of preparation of food. As usual, moreover, the unwrapping of the body is related to the possibility of experiencing such “authenticity”: in order to get onto the tatami zone, people are asked to take off their shoes, which should be taken on again when living it.

Finally, it is remarkable the use of lowered curtain rods and completely opaque awnings (Fig. 99), which suggests the attempt to prevent those sitting inside to look outside rather than obstructing the view of people standing outside.

5.3.1.7 Conclusion

The analysed cases differ with respect to many aspects. On the other hand, it is particularly interesting to focus on the analogies among them in order to identify some *isotopies*⁶⁶ underlying the Japanese ethnic experience.

⁶⁶ Greimas used the term *isotopy* to refer to the repetition, along a syntagmatic chain, of semes (basic meaning traits) ensuring homogeneity to a discourse-enunciated: “Le concept d’isotopie a désigné d’abord l’itérativité, le long d’une chaîne syntagmatique, de classèmes qui assurent au discours-énoncé son homogénéité. [...] Dans un second temps, le concept d’isotopie a été élargi : au lieu de désigner uniquement l’itérativité de classèmes, il se définit comme la récurrence de catégories sémiques, que celles-ci soient thématiques (ou abstraites) ou figuratives”, Greimas and Courtés 1979, 188 (“The concept of isotopy first referred to the iterativity, along a syntagmatic chain, of classemes ensuring homogeneity to the discourse-enunciated. [...] Secondly, the concept of isotopy was expanded: instead of designating only the iterativity of classemes, it was defined as the repetition of semic categories, be they thematic (or abstract) or figurative”), [translation mine]). Umberto Eco further investigated this concept, preferring the idea of “direction” to that of “repetition” (“a constancy in going in a direction that a text exhibits when submitted to rules of interpretative coherence”, 1986, 201), while other scholars established different classifications including semantic, phonetic, prosodic,

First of all, in each case a narrative structure is easily identifiable: after *manipulation* and the establishment of an explicit or implicit contract with the Sender/Manipulator, as well as the achievement of the *competence* (related to the factors required to accomplish the action), the Subject/Receiver can realise his *performance* (the actual fulfilment of the action), opening the way to the *sanction* (the evaluation of the realisation of the action by the Sender and the corresponding reward or punishment).⁶⁷

Such structure seems to be related to a particular categorisation of the spatial dimension. The *heterotopical* space generally coincides with the most external spatial layers (the space surrounding the entrance, the door, sometimes also the initial aisle or part of it), where customers express their wish (*wanting-to-do*) of having a Japanese eating experience and respond to the need (*having-to-do*) of going through such layers in order to proceed with their narrative program. The process of unwrapping of space, moreover, is generally associated with the unwrapping of body,⁶⁸ which can be either formalised (e.g. Arcadia and Wasabi) or not (e.g. Guu Izakaya, Shinobu, Ginger, and Sansui), either partial (i.e. the overcoats, Arcadia, Guu Izakaya, Shinobu, Ginger, and Sansui—Sushi and Yakiniku rooms) or total (i.e. the shoes, Wasabi and Sansui—Tatami room), or in some cases even provisional and therefore avoidable (e.g. the patio of Guu Izakaya, where the crossing of the internal zone generally does not require any unwrapping because of the process of re-wrapping associated to the access to the terrace). At the level of social subjects, manipulation implies the first contact between the Subject and the Sender, that is, customers and the

stylistic, enunciative, rhetorical, presuppositional, syntactic, and narrative isotopies (cf. Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1976). To the purposes of the present research, it is essential to notice that, among all possible distinctions, “the concept of isotopy goes far beyond the level of discursive structures” (Eco 1979b, 42).

⁶⁷ For the details concerning the analysis of narrative structures, cf. Greimas 1970 and 1983, as well as their applications in Greimas 1976.

⁶⁸ Such observation draws the attention to the importance of *body* and *corporeality* in relation to space. This aspect will emerge more evidently when analysing the other levels of the spatial dimensions, cf. §5.3.2 and §5.3.3.

providers of the eating experience. The latter seem in turn to respond to a “wrapping logic” according to which, as eaters go through the spatial layers, getting closer to the space of the performance as well as to the *oku* of the restaurant, they change role, ranging from welcoming waiters, to serving waiters, and cooks. Furthermore, in some cases, as we have seen, such contact takes place before customers’ arrival to the restaurant, through particular means of communication, such as the phone or the Internet, with interesting implications related to the encyclopaedia and the competence of the eater. The *paratopical* space is precisely the space where such competence is acquired. Generally moved up by the consultation of the restaurants webpages or the request of information by phone or to other people, the acquisition of *knowing-how-to-do* commonly begins before the arrival to the eating place, as a particular encyclopaedic knowledge is often required to make a proper reservation. Such competence is then completed by the menu, offering Subjects information about the plates and some of their practices of preparation and consumption, and the same spatial configuration, with *topoi* covering particular actantial roles and modal configurations and interacting with other (human or spatial) actants. As regards to the *being-able-to-do*, instead, social subjects play a crucial role, as they intervene in the process of unwrapping of body, while functioning as guides—and, at the same time, controllers—of the unwrapping of space and the development of particular practices. Once acquired the necessary competence, Subjects can realise their performance in the *utopian* space, coinciding with the dining room, and, specifically, the space of the table and the plate, whose details will be analysed in the following. This is the space where the discrepancies between the enunciational subjects of the space and the social subjects who actually get in touch with it emerge most evidently, generating interesting processes of resemantisation and recalling another essential component of the canonical narrative system: sanction. Consisting in the evaluation of the performance and the (positive or negative)

retribution that the performing Subject has incurred by a Sender/Judge, sanction is somehow ambiguous in the case of the eating experience, requiring a further reflection over the actantial roles it presupposes. We have so far assumed, in fact, that customers were the Subjects, while the providers of the eating experience represented the Senders. Such consideration, partially built on the elements pointed out in Chapter 1 according to Goffman's theorisations (1961; 1970),⁶⁹ was rather enhanced by the field analysis, which, as mentioned in the previous, highlighted the importance of the hierarchical structures associated with the unwrapping of space and the roles related to the considered cases. Recalling the referential semiosphere (cf. Benedict 1946 [1978], 55–56; Henry 1993), the spatial configuration seems to point out the *power* associated with the practices of preparation of food and the figures related to it. While cooks dominate the *oku* of the restaurant, the kitchen, because of their knowledge and the deriving higher position they cover, waiters generally move into and out of it, functioning as transitional figures whose role, although not comparable to that of cooks, allows them to correlate the hierarchical levels and spatial layers differentiating such figures from eaters. Therefore, such configuration unequivocally defines the providers of the eating experience as Senders and the eaters as Subjects. On the other hand, we should remember that a same actantial role can be covered by different characters, or a single character can take on more than one role. In the case of Shinobu, for example, the review appearing at the entrance reveals a previous narrative program identifying the cook, and more generally the eating experience offered by the restaurant, as the Subject, and presuming a second-level Sender (an eater with a particular knowledge) called to judge their performance. From a similar perspective, all eaters could be seen as Senders of the people in charge of the eating experience, with the consumption or waste of food,

⁶⁹ Basically, the eating experience can be conceived as a sort of test for a Subject who, with a view to a positive sanction, establishes a contract with the Sender; for more details, cf. §1.7.

different possible expressions of appreciation, and the payment defining the moment of sanction. Finally, as mentioned when dealing with Goffman's observations,⁷⁰ the figurativisation of the Sender can find expression either in the restaurateurs (tutors and guarantors of the eating experience) or the other diners (who could be themselves Senders or Subjects with respect to a considered Subject), with the same actantial roles covered by different actors. Such variable configuration affects the spatial analysis, as the heterotopical space of manipulation can come to coincide either to the dining room—with the Sender-waiter sanctioning the Subject-eater's performance by congratulating him, or recognising his inability to perform particular practices of consumption (e.g. using chopsticks) by offering him alternative solutions and tools (e.g. forks or spoons)—or other places, such as the cash register counter—in the case of paying after having consumed (and eventually appreciated) the results of cooks' performance and the waiters' service. And similar observations could be made also for the other here considered aspects.

To conclude the analysis of the macro-level, it should be noted that the layers wrapping the considered restaurants and, more generally, eating experiences, could be either material (e.g. walls, doors, screens, awnings, etc.) or immaterial (e.g. system of lighting, sound, nooks, etc.). The *oku* of the restaurant, according to the logic described with respect to the narrative structures, generally coincides with the kitchen, that is, the space of the practices of preparation of food, according to a system of crossing of layers describable in terms of high *vs.* low, inside, *vs.* outside, continuous *vs.* discontinuous, etc. In most cases (with the exception of Guu Izakaya, marked by *exposition*), such spatial "heart" is associated with *obstruction* or, at most, *inaccessibility*, although the inclusion of some annexes—such as sushi bars or cooking platforms—generally breaks in such impossibility or difficulty to see, introducing visual *accessibility*. Furthermore, going beyond

⁷⁰ Cf. §1.7.

space, the wrapping principle sometimes embraces also the *temporal* dimension, as in the case of restaurants requiring reservation in advance and, more generally, with respect to all those practices of preparation of food performed before the opening hours.⁷¹

In addition to all the interesting elements pointed out about each particular case study, these observations remark what stated about the menu: beyond the Model Customer and the parameters established by the levels of the enunciated and the enunciation, it should be remembered that, in social life, Empirical Customers interact with the spatial dimension, cooperating with it and eventually resemantise it. This can have different effects on the process of interpretation—and, therefore, success—of the ethnic eating experience. If in some cases it leads Subjects to aberrant decoding, preventing them from realising their narrative programs or receive a positive sanction (by the Senders-providers of the experience, or the other diners, or even themselves), in other circumstances it enhances and formalises interesting processes of resemantisation, depositing particular forms of textuality. For this reason, while in the case of Sansui the tatami zone has a configuration that is very similar to that of the Japanese matted-areas, at Wasabi it assumes on a different structure, which, although recalling the original model it makes reference to, introduces meaningful differences relative to it. This, in turn, facilitates the performance of local eaters, making translation processes more visible and re-deseigning the spatial configuration according to their common standards. On the other hand, it entails unnegligible risks, which range from undermining the nature of the ethnic experience to produce processes of *normalisation* that make it impossible or very difficult for users to identify the same processes of “translation”.⁷²

⁷¹ Even in the case of Guu Izakaya, where some eaters are fully exposed to the kitchen and the practices of preparation of food, in fact, the processes of peeling, skinning, etc. take place before the opening of the restaurant, and are therefore characterised by obstruction.

⁷² We will be back to such dynamics when presenting the overall concluding remarks (cf. §5.4).

5.3.2 The Table: Space, Body, and Proxemics

Proceeding with the zoom movement described in the previous, after the macro-level of the dining space, we should take into consideration the space of the *table*. Focusing on such topic implies considering some fundamental concepts, principally based on the relation between space and *corporeality*. Within the field of spatial analysis, the body has increasingly been considered as a crucial issue (cf. Low 2003, 9). Some first important remarks can be found particularly in Michel Foucault's works (1967 [1984; ET 1986]) on the *docile body*, social structure, and power, as well as in the analysis of the concept of *habitus* elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu (1979), and the theorisations about *structuration* by Anthony Giddens (1984). A theoretical formulation providing a material and cognitive understanding of the intersection and interpretation of body, space, and culture has then found expression in the idea of *embodied spaces* elaborated by Setha M. Low (1996; 2000; 2003; 2009):

I use the term *body* to refer to its biological and social characteristics and *embodiment* as an “indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world” (Csordas 1994, 12). Embodied space is the location where human experience and consciousness take on material and spatial form. (Low 2003, 10)

Building on the idea that the space occupied by the body and its perception are related to emotive and cognitive parameters, as well as to social relations, sense of self, and cultural predispositions (cf. *ibid.*), this statement recalls many other interesting works and perspectives, coming to the description of the body as “a moving, speaking, cultural space in and of itself” (*ibid.*, 16). Particularly, it is interesting to reflect on its links to the concept of the *techniques of the body* developed by Marcel Mauss (1934 [ET 1973]), that is, “the ways in which from society to society men know how to use their bodies” (1934 [ET 1973], 70).

According to the French scholar, the body is “man’s first and most natural technical object, and at the same time his first technical means” (*ibid.*, 76), which is to say it is both the original means people have to shape their world and the same substance out of which the world itself is shaped. Such a perspective is particularly significant because—as Marrone (2005b) states—meaning is anchored to senses, which, in turn, “have sense” because they are culturally determined (4). Therefore, even perception⁷³ cannot be conceived as a pre-individual and *natural* process. The body is always a *social* body, which perceives itself and the world around it because it forms part of that world and shares its same cultural configurations (cf. *ibid.*).

After an initial phase of indifference—sometimes even “aversion”, according to Marrone (2005b, 8)—towards such issues, semiotics has begun to deal with corporeality from three main perspectives. (1) Figurative and aesthesis studies have focused on the way sensory perception make the existence of subjectivity and objectivity possible by contributing to the construction of texts and discourses signification (cf. *ibid.*, 11-13). (2) According to the point of view of a semiotics of passions, moreover, if the meaning of actions is related to intellectual logics (*wanting to, having to, being able to, knowing how to*), the sense of passions generally relies more on the body and a series of oppositions characterising it, i.e. euphoria *vs.* dysphoria, openness *vs.* closeness, attraction *vs.* repulsion (cf. *ibid.*, 15). (3) But corporeality goes beyond sensory perception and passions, embracing also *spatiality*. As Marrone reports, on the one hand, space always *means* according to an individual or collective subject living in a given space, which re-interprets its physical peculiarities depending on particular values and aims. On

⁷³ Among the numerous works devoted to the phenomenological phenomena, mentions should be made particularly to Maurice Merleau Ponty’s *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945), where the French scholar discusses the primacy of perception in the experience of the body. According to Merleau Ponty, our body is a paradoxical entity: on the one hand, we perceive it as an object in the world; on the other hand, we perceive the world through it. Building on this observation, Marrone (2011) points out the essential ambiguity of the body, which can be expressed through semantic oppositions such as external/internal, enclosing/enclosed, etc., and is constitutive of our semiotic existence (313). From a similar but somehow different perspective, Miles Richardson (1982; 1984) has focused on the relation between the body and perception conceiving it as indissolubly tied to processes of abstraction and objectification.

the other hand, such space contains *already meaningful* articulations, which contribute to establish subjective identities as they promote systems of values orienting subjects in their programs and actions (*ibid.*, 13–14). Such observations evidently recall the studies in *proxemics*, which consists in “the interrelated observations and theories of man’s use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture” (Hall 1966, 1). Yet in 1955 Irving Hallowell described spatial schema as representations not only of a position from which viewing the world, but also as symbolic tools for orientation in a spatial world that transcends personal experience. Edward T. Hall (1966; 1968) further enhanced such perspective focusing on the influence of culture on spatial perception and behaviour, and officially establishing the field of proxemics. According to the American anthropologist and cross-cultural researcher, people’s relative position in social situations is regulated by culture, and expresses their relations or their reciprocal feelings (cf. 1966, 147–189). The *intimate distance*, generally considered improper in the public sphere by many cultures, is related to close involvement and the intensification of the sensorial perception of the other person: the *close phase* (< 6 in / < 15 cm) of this distance is *contact*—e.g. embracing or discussing with someone—, while in the *far phase* (6–18 in / 15–45 cm) only one’s hands can reach the Other’s extremities. *Personal distance* includes a close phase (1.5–2.5 ft / 45–75 cm), typical of common conversations, and a far phase (2.5–4 ft / 75–120 cm) exceeding the possibility for physical contact, characterising interactions between strangers. In the close phase (4–7 ft / 1.2–2.1 m) of *social distance* impersonal affairs are managed and work relationships are generally held, while its far phase (7–12 ft / 2.1–3.6 m) is used for polite isolation from other people. Finally, *public distance* consists of a *close phase* (12–25 ft / 3.6–7.5 m), which makes the details of the body barely visible, and a *far phase* (> 25 ft / > 7.5 m) generally characterising public figures on public occasions. In Hall’s view, the body seems to represent the means for spatial orientation and interactions with other people and the environment. However, it should be remembered that such standards are not universal, but vary depending on cultures: Hall’s measurements,

as well as most of the reactions he classifies in relation to distances, are specific to the American culture (with particular reference to the white middle class).⁷⁴ What is important is that, although in other semiospheres—such as, for example, the Italian, Swiss, or Japanese one—these parameters can be different, a code is always present. Moreover, these spatial aspects of behaviour tend to be tacit, so that social actors generally become aware of them in culture contact situations, mostly because of their violation (cf. Low 2011, 13). Such variability emphasises the communicative, and not purely biological, nature of human reactions to space and distances, which draws attention to the importance of translation processes between different semiospheres,⁷⁵ as well as the unavoidability of taking into consideration the role of corporeality. Here the concept of *embodied space* becomes particularly interesting, as it efficaciously connects the spatial and corporeal dimensions by stressing the importance of the body as “a physical and biological entity, as lived experience, and as a center of agency, a location for speaking and acting on the world” (Low 2009, 26), which, in turn—we could remark building on Marrone’s observations—is influenced by the space he interacts with.

While Low speaks of embodied spaces, Marrone (2005b) opts for the concept of *social body*, stressing the importance of reciprocal influence between spatial dimension and corporeal entities: there is no semiosis without a body experiencing

⁷⁴ Hall also deals with proxemic patterns in a cross-cultural context, particularly focusing on Germany, England, France, Japan, and the Arab world (cf. 1966, 131–164). However, rather than providing us with a classification as the one established for Americans, he proposes some general observations aiming at shedding additional light on people’s unawareness of their own patterns and to point out the great need for improved intercultural understanding (cf. *ibid.*, 129).

⁷⁵ In this respect, it is interesting to consider also Michael Argyle’s *Bodily Communication* (1975), where the English social psychologist proposes a reflection over cultural differences in bodily communication (49–70), taking into consideration not only aspects such as the adornment of the body, gestures, gaze, and facial expressions, but also spatial behaviour. Recalling Watson’s work (1970), he distinguishes between “contact cultures” (Arabs, Latin Americans, and Southern European) and “non-contact cultures” (Asians, Indians-Pakistanis, and North Europeans), coming to state that, albeit certain aspects of bodily communication are common to all cultures, cultural differences affect every aspect of non-verbal communication, becoming particularly important in inter-cultural dynamics. Although certainly needing to be expanded and updated, the results of Argyle’s analysis—and, particularly, his observations on the Japanese—represent an interesting reference frame for the analysis of the role of corporeality within the ethnic eating experience.

the world, that is, shaping it but at the same time being modelled by it. Considering the body as the source of both exteroceptivity and interoceptivity, new developments in semiotics have come to conceive it as the motor of any constitutive relation between the level of expression and the level of content. Such statement, according to Marrone, can be efficaciously discussed building on the idea of *symbolic efficacy* (cf. 2005b, 161–167), which draws to consider the body as an entity related, always and in any case, to a given culture forming and transforming it. Such a *social body* abandons therefore any physiological or purely natural dynamic, embracing the intersubjective dimension and the cultural determination of meaning (20). This leads the Italian scholar to analyse corporeality according to a sociosemiotic approach, focusing on the unceasing redefinition of the boundaries between the inside and the outside of body, as well as on the complex management of the movements of introduction and expulsion of materials from it, and all those processes underlying the production, transformation—and “translation”, we could add—of meanings through corporeality.

When dealing with food, such issues become even more important and significant: according to Deborah Lupton (1996), cooking and eating “are central to [...] our experience of embodiment, or the ways that we live in and through our bodies” (1). With this respect, it is particularly interesting to consider the process of ingestion and incorporation of food, recalling Fischler’s research (1988; 1990), as well as the significant considerations by Marrone (2005b) on the porosity of the body, and the practices and rituals related to these aspects. Moreover, the same culinary space—dishes, bowls, pots, tables, food design, wrapping structures, etc.—is characterised by a peculiar morphology—a sort of “proxemics”, in a way—recalling other symbolic spaces, such as the body or the house (cf. Ricci and Ceccarelli 2000, 137). This stresses the importance of focusing on the analysis of the space of the table, where all the previously mentioned processes originate and are continuously resemantised, especially in the case of the ethnic meal.

5.3.2.1 Arcadia

Arcadia has a total of 135 seats, with 10 stools at the sushi bar and 125 pews at the square and circular tables (with 4 to 6 chairs each, and with the possibility to join more tables and pews for bigger groups of customers), which are subdivided into two rooms: the main dining room⁷⁶ hosts 100 chairs, while the remaining 25 are located in the smaller lateral room accessible through an open arcade connecting it to the former. Beyond the dissimilarities regarding visibility and the aspects pointed out by the analysis of the macro-spatial level, it is interesting to focus on what differentiates the tables and the sushi bar with respect to proxemics and the configuration of the table.

First of all, it should be noted that the chairs (cf. Fig. 54), whose backs and trapezoidal seats are both covered by brown leather, can be located all along the perimeter of the tables, either facing or flanking each other. By contrast, the wooden circular stools surrounding the sushi bar make the visual frontal contact among eaters disappear, as they are placed side by side (cf. Fig. 53). If people's hearing continue receiving stimuli from the other diners, making communication among them still possible, the sight is requested to focus primarily on food (the fish in the small glass case), the cooks (working in the space enclosed by the counter where people eat), and the practices of preparation of plates (taking place before their eyes). A series of oppositions at the level of expression—rectilinear *vs.* curvilinear, facing *vs.* flanking, movable and reconfigurable *vs.* fixed and stable, etc.—recall and enhance the contrast already detected by the macro-analysis. The tables and chairs are characterised by a spatial organisation (frontal and lateral position, seats on all sides of the table, possibility of easily touching all other diners or reaching their extremities⁷⁷) fitting the visual and gestural

⁷⁶ Where the sushi bar and the 10 stools are located.

⁷⁷ Except in the case of organising very big tables, where nonetheless visual contact is generally kept as much as possible.

interactional standards presupposed by the idea of commensality typical of the local foodsphere. On the other hand, the sushi bar (characterised by side by side stools, the “L” form with the glass case partially obstructing the visual contact among diners, and small possibility of physical contact) suggests the idea of the meal as a personal and intimate moment, which can still be shared with a few other people,⁷⁸ but firstly requires to draw attention to food, its practices of preparation, and one’s own eating experience.

Such configuration is echoed by the same setting of the table, which adds on interesting elements of analysis. When getting to the round or square tables, costumers find them covered by white tablecloths. On the tablecloth, each cover includes a common transparent water glass and a white cloth napkin, with a fork on the left and a knife on the right⁷⁹ (Fig. 100).



Figure 100 – Cover – Common tables, Arcadia (© Arcadia).

Waiters then bring to the table some bread and breadstick, as well as the menu, leaving customers the time to decide what they want to eat. After the order is made, new elements come to the table: in the case of opting for a

⁷⁸ As remarked by the proximity between eaters, which could be inscribed in what Hall defines the close phase of personal distance (1.5–2.5 ft / 45–75 cm).

⁷⁹ According to the most common Italian standards.

Japanese meal, a white and black paper case wrapping two wooden *waribashi* (disposable chopsticks) is placed next to the knife in a vertical position,⁸⁰ thus breaking the common Japanese standards,⁸¹ along with a black soy sauce dish,⁸² and, depending on the ordered drinks and foods, other optional glassware (e.g. wine glasses or teacups) and/or tableware (e.g. spoons for soups or desserts). The mixing between the Italian and Japanese foodsphere becomes therefore evident: if new, exotic elements invade the table connoting it as (partially) “Japanese”, the connection with the local reality is assured by the presence of the bread/breadsticks and the local tableware, which are not removed but remain on the table throughout the entire eating experience. Moreover, the chromatic rhyme established between the resulting spatial configuration of the table and the menu are remarkable: the monochrome characterising the pages of the *carte* recurs in the contrasts between the tablecloth and the napkins, on the one hand, and the soy sauce and other elements of the tableware (e.g. the dishes), on the other hand. The same chromatic aspect characterises the case wrapping chopsticks, which resembles a sort of kimono⁸³ obtained thanks to a simple folding of the paper, recalling the traditional Japanese art of *origami*. Finally, it is interesting to notice that the black dishes used for the soy sauce and other foods are somehow shiny, which makes them still keeping the darkness mentioned by Tanizaki (1993) as a crucial element of the beauty of Japanese tableware, but lacking that particular opaqueness and “sheen of antiquity” (*ibid.*, 11) he describes as essential.

By contrast, the counter (Fig. 101) is surmounted by individual black placemats which do not cover its entire surface but just partially “veil” it, making it possible to see the wood it is made of, and enhancing the “individualisation” of the eating experience suggested by the disposal of the

⁸⁰ On a black wooden chopstick rest.

⁸¹ Cf. §4.2.

⁸² While the soy sauce dispenser is brought to the table only in a second moment, together with the plates.

⁸³ Marked by the name of the restaurant, dominating the white area.

seats and the spatial configuration of the dining room. The same opposition between covering and veiling, moreover, seems to suggest the intention to show, or at least to make customers glimpse more than what they can see when sitting at the table, therefore recalling the particular dynamics relates to the vision of the practises of preparation of foods analysed in the previous.



Figure 101 – Cover – Sushi Bar, Arcadia.

As regards the components of the cover, on each placemat we find a white cloth napkin and a (significantly opaque) black soy sauce dish, together with the disposable chopsticks, wrapped in the same paper case described above, and always in a vertical position. Moreover, no component of the table is characterised by particular inscriptions or decorations recalling the Japanese semiosphere. On the contrary, the only mark appearing on the case wrapping the chopsticks is the logo of the restaurant, which—as analysed in the previous⁸⁴—includes only Latin letters and makes reference to the typical local noble style design characterising the venue. These elements, together with the presence of common water glasses⁸⁵ and the use of the same

⁸⁴ Cf. §5.1.

⁸⁵ When sitting, in fact, customers are served water and provided with the menu, as it is usual in many restaurants in Italy (but not in Japan).

napkins adopted at the tables, makes the process of translation visible, recalling the double nature of the restaurant and the continuity between the “Italian” and “Japanese”-characterised spaces highlighted at the macro-level. On the other hand, no cutlery is provided and a black particularly designed soy sauce dispenser appears on the counter, insisting on its Japanese characterisation.

5.3.2.2 Wasabi

Wasabi hosts 6 tables with 4 seats, and 8 tables with 2 seats, subdivided into the two dining rooms described in the previous (with just two seats close to the sushi counter). The main aspect differentiating the spatial configuration of the table and pews of the two areas is the presence of the tatami, whose details were described when dealing with the macro-level. On the other hand, the same style and design characterises all the seating and tables,⁸⁶ creating continuity throughout the rooms. Moreover, both in the case of the first dining room and the tatami zone, such structures are fixed and cannot be moved to form bigger tables, enhancing the conception of the eating experience offered by the restaurant as a private or just partially shared experience. Tables are well distanced from each other, creating a spatial configuration that Edward Hall would describe in terms of social distance or, in a very few cases (e.g. the 2 tables with 4 pews in the first dining room), of far phase of the personal distance. Even within the same table, furthermore, a maximum of 2 seats are placed side by side, and never in a perpendicular angle. In the rare cases of using benches instead of individual chairs (i.e. in the first dining room), the same distance between customers is kept through the arrangement of covers.

⁸⁶ With the exception of the benches, which, however, represent a sort of extension of the wooden walls delimitating the area, therefore not marking any particular point of discontinuity.

As regards to the internal organisation of the tables, no tablecloths or other elements cover them in any room: as customers arrive to the restaurant, the only objects appearing on the dark wooden surface of the tables are cream-colour cotton napkins and reusable red or green (depending on the tables) plastic chopsticks decorated with floral motifs and wrapped by a thin paper strip with the same decoration (Figs. 102).



Figure 102 – Covers, Wasabi.

The *ohashi*, leaning on an opaque black stone chopsticks rest, are placed in a horizontal position, just below each napkin, according the common Japanese standards. It is interesting to note that, when bringing the menu to the table, waiters provide customers with an *o-shibori* (おしぼり or お絞り), the typical Japanese hot wet hand towel they are invited to use to clean their hands before eating. Presented on a small bamboo or wood stand, as usual, the *o-shibori* does not imply any direct physical contact between waiters and eaters, but it is offered to customers through the intermediation of the table, exactly as the menu and all the other elements brought to the table during the eating experience.

Finally, reference should be made to the same actors in charge of the preparation and service of the table: Wasabi's waiters always wear typical

Japanese dress⁸⁷ and, just as customers, need to get unwrapped of their sandals when accessing the tatami room. In this area, moreover, because of the height of the tables, they generally have to kneel in order to place or take the dishes and other objects on the table (Fig. 103), with interesting implications on the hierarchical dynamics underlying the eating experience.



Figure 103 – Waiter cleaning a table, Wasabi.

As mentioned in the previous, the macro-spatial configuration seems to establish a sort of subordination of those consuming food to those in charge of its preparation and service. Particularly, the latter's "higher" position would let them access even the most hidden and internal space of the eating experience, echoing the importance of hierarchy in the Japanese semiosphere. On the other hand, when the eating experience takes place in

⁸⁷ According to a precise code, which recalls both gender differences (cf. Figs. 63 and 65) and hierarchical dynamics (as remarked by the different kimono dressed by the waiter at the entrance in Fig. 62, who deals uniquely with welcoming guests and managing the payment processing, and the other waiters serving food and cleaning tables, cf. Fig. 103; cf. also Argyle 1975 [1976], 88). Such aspects cannot be analysed more in depth here, but are very significant too.

the tatami zone,⁸⁸ the configuration of space itself seems to require waiters to kneel down, that is, to lower themselves in order to reach the table and the customer. While contributing to further stress their higher position in relation to eaters, this element highlights their *transitional* characterisation: in order to make the eating experience possible for customers, waiters need to abandon their more elevated position, although temporarily, and to (physically and metaphorically) reach their same position.

5.3.2.3 Guu Izakaya

One of the most evident peculiarities differentiating Guu Izakaya from the other analysed cases is the presence of three big wooden tables for 12 people each (cf. Figs. 67, 70, and 71), with benches⁸⁹ substituting chairs and footstools along the longer sides. Such aspect considerably affects the conception of the offered eating experience, which is not presented as an intimate and narrowly shared moment, but rather as a manifestation of commensality and sharing. This is reflected even in the menu, which officially sanctions the venue as the perfect place for parties and banquets by including a particular note on the costs of the service.⁹⁰ On the level of practices, moreover, cooks and waiters cheerfully take part in celebrations by offering birthday cakes and singing celebrative songs to the guest(s) of honour. Moreover, from the point of view of proxemics, the understanding of the meal as an essentially shared experience finds expression in the accentuated proximity among eaters, who share not only the table, but also the same seating surface.

⁸⁸ Which is the closest space to what we identified as the *oku* of the restaurant and the eating experience.

⁸⁹ As mentioned before, benches are present even at Wasabi, in the first dining room. Nonetheless, they host a maximum of 2 people per table, not radically changing the distribution and configuration of seating and the proxemic patterns characterising the other pews.

⁹⁰ “Parties of 7+ are subject to a 15% automatic gratuity” (Guu Izakaya’s menu).

On the other hand, the small tables with two footstools on the slightly higher floor and in the patio (cf. Fig. 67) seem to promote a more intimate eating experience, whose privacy is nonetheless partially broken by the continuity with the surrounding environments (either the big tables in the internal dining room or the outside reality partially communicating with the patio). Furthermore, they are very close to each other, making all eaters find themselves in a condition that Edward Hall would describe in terms of close phase of the personal distance,⁹¹ when not even of far phase of the intimate phase with respect to people sitting at the near tables. Again, therefore, emphasis is put on conviviality and sharing more than on intimacy and privacy.

An intermediate solution characterises the bars (cf. Figs. 67 and 72), where people still share the same counter in a condition of physical proximity, but sit on individual stools symbolically delimiting the intimate space of each diner, although in a closer relation with respect to the other considered examples. Moreover, as analysed more in depth in the previous, eaters are totally exposed to the practices of preparation of food, which put “communication” with food and food practices before interaction with other diners. A further aspect differentiating these areas from the tables is related to the material and chromatic dimension: while the tables are made of aged more (the small ones) or less (the big ones) dark wood, the counters are made of apparently untouched black marble, whose visual effect is echoed by the large presence of metal and other reflecting surfaces in the kitchen.

With respect to the internal organisation of the table and the disposal of covers, the different surfaces share the same configuration: no tablecloth or placemat is provided, but the dishes and the other objects brought to the table lean directly on the wooden surface of the tables and the counters. When customers get to the tables/bars, they find a small white dish

⁹¹ Which should be reserved to people deciding to have a conversation or, in this case, to take part in the same eating experience.

surmounted by a paper napkin and two reusable chopsticks placed in a horizontal position, just in the half of the plate (Figs. 104, 70, 71 and 72).



Figure 104 – Covers – Small Table, Guu Izakaya.

No chopstick rest is provided, so that people are pushed to lean their *ohashi* on one side of the dish or on the napkin when not using them, exactly as if they were using common local cutlery. On one side of the table or in the middle of big tables and bars customers can find the fixed menu, while the menu of the day is brought by waiters in a second moment, together with glasses and water—which, according to the local foodsphere’s prescriptions, is offered free of charge to all customers.⁹²

5.3.2.4 Shinobu

Shinobu hosts 3 tables with 4 seats and 5 tables with 2 seats. Such configuration is not fixed, as the tables could be moved, but tends not to be modified, opting for a conception of the meal as an intimate or narrowly shared experience. On the other hand, because of the dimensions of the venue, even in this case the tables are really close to each other, establishing almost the same proxemic patterns analysed in the example of Guu Izakaya

⁹² In addition to it, people can afterwards order any other drink.

(although a larger distance is established between the two main rows of tables). On the other hand, chairs are here preferred to benches and footstools, and covers are slightly more distanced from each other, partially redefining distances within the tables. Moreover, no seats are placed in a perpendicular angle, but only in a frontal or lateral position.



Figure 105 – Covers – Shinobu (© Shinobu).



Figure 106 – Chopsticks – Shinobu.

When customers access the restaurant, they find the tables covered by a black cotton tablecloth, in turn surmounted by a smaller white paper tablecloth, hosting a white ceramic soy sauce dispenser, as well as a white

paper napkin and a pair of chopsticks for each cover (Fig. 105). Specifically, *waribashi* (Fig. 106) are completely wrapped by a closed paper case reporting the Japanese writing おてもと (*otemoto*, according to the denomination used for chopsticks in public eating places), without any particular graphic style or inscription referred to the restaurant. The only remarkable elements on the visual side are the inclusion of some leaves, which recall naturality and its centrality for *washoku*, and the use of green for their interior and the circles surrounding them, referring to the same meaning. As regards to the chromatic configuration of the table, monochromy, clearly perceptible as one enters the restaurant (Fig. 105), is further enhanced by the other elements brought to the table during the meal, with a large employment of white ceramic dishes and black bowls.

Finally, it should be noticed that, as in the case of Guu Izakaya, no glasses are present on the table at the beginning of the eating experience. Nonetheless, water glasses are provided together with the menu and filled in by the waiter every time they get emptied, according to the local custom. Ceramic opaque glasses are instead brought in the case of ordering tea, while other particular glasses are provided in the case of drinking beers or other beverages.

5.3.2.5 Ginger

Ginger's number and configuration of seating vary depending on the room: the Sushi room includes 25 coloured stools (Fig. 82) at the sushi bar and 3 to 4 pews for each of the two corner composed of a little polychromatic couch and some poufs (Fig. 81); the "A la Carte" room hosts 18 differently coloured swivel armchairs (Figs. 85 and 86) around the counter and 8 pews (4 armchairs and 4 seats on the couch flanking the wall, Fig. 85) on the right side of the room; finally, in the external patio 6 benches

can host up to 4 people each (Fig. 80), recalling the particular spatial and corporeal dynamics described in the case of Guu Izakaya. The chromatic and material dimensions ensure continuity across these spaces: all seats are covered with soft variously coloured cloth,⁹³ while tables are made of dark wood, with the only exception of the lighter small circular tables at the corner of the Sushi room (Fig. 81). If, as mentioned when dealing with the analysis of the macro-spatial level, the seating seems to connote this area as an annex of the second room, the configuration of the tables differentiates them from all other spaces, promoting an idea of the meal consumed in this area as a transitory and somehow ephemeral, not authentic nor complete experience.

As regards to the internal organisation of the table, in all rooms polychromy is reduced to monochromy: while the small circular tables and the tables in the patio are not set in any way, the other covers include a white cotton napkin each, with a pair of wooden chopsticks resting on a small stone close to it. Common disposable chopsticks used in restaurants (which need to be separated before usage) are adopted, although they are not wrapped as it is usual for *waribashi*, directly leaning on the stone (on their thinner end) and on the table or the napkin (on their thicker end) (Figs. 107 and 108). In addition to these elements, two transparent glasses are generally present on the table: a small glass is used to offer some sake to customers as they sit; a bigger glass is generally used for the drinks (water, beers, etc.) ordered in a second moment, but can also disappear. In the case of opting for tea, for example, the traditional Japanese small iron teapot (急須, *kyūsu*) and a small coloured opaque glass or cup substitute the glass (Fig. 107, in the background). Finally, the presence of a particular element distinguishes the setting of sushi bar from the preparation of other eating spaces: immediately after having ordered drinks, customers are provided with a small white dish

⁹³ Also the outdoor benches are covered by polychromatic seat cushions when the weather conditions allows customer to have dinner in the patio.

composed of three sections (Fig. 107). The left space hosts some *gari* (the typical Japanese marinated ginger), while on the right there is some wasabi. In the middle, an empty space can be directly filled in with soy sauce by customers, using the crystal soy sauce dispenser with a non-drip cap available on the tables each three or four covers.



Figure 107 – Cover, Sushi Room – Ginger.



Figure 108 – “A la Carte” room – Ginger (© Ginger).

From the point of view of proxemics and the disposal of the eating experience, the conveyor belt (Fig. 109) marks a significant difference

between the Sushi room, on the one hand, and the other spaces, on the other hand. In the latter, waiters are in charge of bringing food and plates to customers, who can therefore enjoy their meal in a very relaxed mood (enhanced by the configuration of seating), primarily focusing on the moment of consumption of food and in some cases just partially enjoying cooks dealing with the practices of its preparation. By contrast, the Sushi room marks the passage from such a relaxed and consumption-oriented conception of the meal to the empowerment of eaters' *agency*:⁹⁴ first of all, the use of stools reduce the comfort of the seating, leading people not to abandon themselves within the soft backs of armchairs or couches, but rather to stand erect. Secondly, but more importantly, the partial visual "communication" with food established in the "A la Carte" room is transformed here into a direct and even physical contact, which is not only suggested by but intrinsic and necessary to the same eating experience.⁹⁵



Figure 109 – Sushi Bar – Ginger.

⁹⁴ Although increasingly spread within the humanities and social sciences, the concept of *agency* is very complex and not easy to define (cf. Donzelli and Fasulo 2007, 11). Beyond all the interesting aspects related to its definition and analysis (cf., in particular, Davidson 1971; Bazzanella 2009; Coppok 2009; Leone 2009), the term is used here to refer to "the ability to act in the world".

⁹⁵ As mentioned in the analysis of the macro-level, in fact, waiters have here the only function of bringing drinks to customers and clean the counter after eaters have emptied the plates previously autonomously taken from the conveyor belt in front of them.

However, it should be remembered that such a contact does not concern cooks, but only food: the distance established between eaters and the providers of the eating experience prevent them from physical contact, as well as from verbal communication, recalling the hierarchical dynamics described in the previous.⁹⁶

Finally, it should be noticed that the presence of the conveyor belt helps eliminating any sort of crossing or overlapping of eater's movements, defining the meal consumed in such space as a partially shared experience, which, however, is based on the recognition and enhancement of the intimate space of every eater.

5.3.2.6 Sansui

The differences distinguishing Sansui's three main dining rooms are evident also with respect to the organisation of the space of the table. In the Sushi room (Fig. 110) 10⁹⁷ dark wooden tables are covered by celadon⁹⁸ individual placemats reporting the logo and the name of the restaurant (written according to the Japanese vertical system of signs writing).



Figure 110 – Covers – Sansui.

⁹⁶ Cf. §5.3.1.5.

⁹⁷ 2 tables with 4 seats and 8 tables with 2 seats.

⁹⁸ A colour widely used in Japan and other Asian cultures.

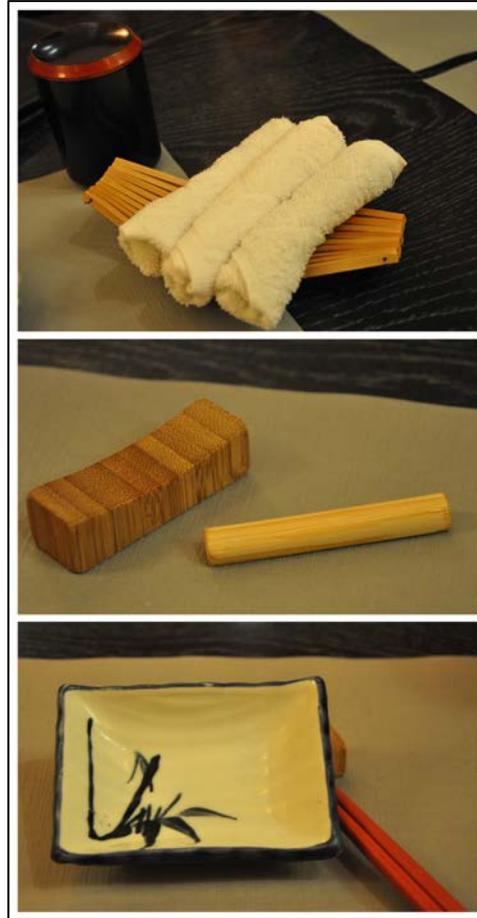


Figure 111 – *O-shibori* on a bamboo stand and soy sauce dispenser (top), chopstick rests (centre), and soy sauce dish (bottom), Sushi room – Sansui.

On each placemat there is a finely embroidered lighter celadon cotton napkin, shaped in a sort of kimono thanks to an *origami* technique. Below the napkin, two reusable red chopsticks are just partially wrapped by a paper case reporting the restaurant's logo, name, and contact details (with the Latin alphabet joining the Japanese characters). The *ohashi* lean on wooden chopstick rests, which can assume different forms (Fig. 111, centre). When providing customers with the menu, waiters also offer each person a hot *o-shibori* to clean his/her hands, by placing a bamboo stand on the table. Two further elements appear on the table before the arrival of plates: a white soy sauce dish (Fig. 111, bottom) decorated with a blue painting recalling a

bamboo branch or a similar natural element and a black and red soy sauce dispenser with a cap (Fig. 111, top). Such objects are present also on the counter of the sushi bar (Fig. 89), where, however, red circular plastic placemats substitute the rectangular celadon paper mats covering the table. This stresses the opposition between the rectilinear characterisation of the seats of the tables and the circular shape of the stools at the sushi bar, further enhancing the contrasts individuated at the macro-level. On the other hand, continuity is assured by the chromatic configuration of the tables and the counter, which are both black, although the different materials they are made of (wood for the tables, marble for the bar) oppose them in terms of opaqueness (the tables) vs. shine (the counter).

With respect to proxemics, it should be remarked that the tables are well-distanced from each other, creating the possibility for customers to live the eating experience as an intimate and restrictively shared moment. The seating, which ensures a certain intimate sphere for each individual, further enhances this aspect: the chairs are well distanced from each other, with a maximum of 2 pews side by side and never in a perpendicular angle; the long benches used in the niche room host a maximum of 2 people; finally, even in the case of the sushi bar, only 5 stools are distributed along the counter.



Figure 112 – Yakiniku Room – Sansui (© Sansui).



Figure 113 – Yakiniku room (Grill) – Sansui (© Sansui).

Such a configuration partially characterises also the Yakiniku room, with some semi-transparent curtains further stressing the separation between the tables, although not marking a sharp discontinuity. On the other hand, with the exception of the two small tables with only one seat each facing the window, the tables become wider, including 8 covers each. Therefore the eating experience assumes a collective connotation, which is stated by the same description offered by the restaurant website: “ideal for banquets” (www.sansui.ch [translation mine]). Moreover, the spatial organisation of the table radically changes: the most evident transformation concerns the inclusion of a grill at the centre of each table (Fig. 113), which moves the transformation from the raw to the cook to the dining room. On the other hand, meat and vegetables are brought to the table already sliced and cut in small pieces, still confining the initial practices of preparation of food to the inaccessible space of kitchen.⁹⁹

When entering the dining room, customers find the black big tables¹⁰⁰ partially covered by two white cotton tablecloths surmounted by black dishes, common wine glasses, red and white cotton napkins, and the

⁹⁹ For more details, cf. §5.3.1.6.

¹⁰⁰ As regards to the two individual tables, only one cover is provided. In Fig. 94 no cover appears, as it was taken at the end of the meal, after guests left and the table was cleaned by waiters. Big tables (e.g. the last part of the one on the left), instead, are generally cleaned and simply covered by a white cloth, in a perpendicular position with respect to the usual tablecloth used for the setting of the table.

common Western cutlery (Fig. 112). The disappearance of chopsticks is remarkable: on the material side, it could be related to the presence of the grill, which makes it dangerous to use objects made of wood or plastic. By contrast, as mentioned in the previous, Japanese tools include particular chopsticks for cooking (*ryoribashi*) or transfer cooked foods to the dish (*saibashi*),¹⁰¹ as well as special *hashi* for *yakiniku*, which could have been adopted in this case. The choice of substituting them by cutlery seems therefore related to symbolic and cultural meanings, which have important implications on the definition of the Model User presupposed by the proposed eating experience. Finally, it should be noticed that the grill is placed in a central position with respect to the width of the table, but in a lateral position, closer to one of the table's side, with respect to its length (Fig. 111). This is really interesting in relation to proxemics, as it favours a series of crossings and overlapping of the movements of eaters, further enhancing the conception of the eating experience as a profoundly and widely shared moment.

Finally, with respect to the tables in the Tatami room (Figs. 98 and 99), they host 4 covers each, according to the same spatial configuration of the Sushi room, but with a crucial difference: as analysed in the previous,¹⁰² the adoption of the mat requires people to sit with their legs crossed, as there is no lower nook in this case. As regards to the setting of the table, no particular tablecloths or objects are present on its surface, with the exception of a soy sauce dispenser resembling the ones used in the Sushi room.¹⁰³ After people have ordered their food, the table is set adding the objects analysed in the case of the Sushi room, therefore including individual placemats, reusable chopsticks, and a folded cotton napkin recalling the shape of a kimono. Even in this case, the position of seats and the disposal of covers keep a certain distance among eaters, while a wooden dividing

¹⁰¹ Cf. §4.2.

¹⁰² Cf. §5.3.1.6.

¹⁰³ Where, by contrast, it was brought to the table only in a second moment.

screen marks—although not completely—the separation between the two tables, enhancing the establishment of a social distance between them.

5.3.2.7 Conclusion

Beyond the peculiarities of each case study, the analysis of the space of the table points out some very interesting issues related to the relation between the spatial and the corporeal dimensions in the ethnic eating experience.

A crucial role is played by the chromatic dimension, as well as by the choice of the materials and objects used for and on the table. Monochromatic contrasts generally mark the difference between shared and personal sphere, causing a sort of “parcelisation” and “individualisation” of the collective space of the table:¹⁰⁴ both counters and small or big tables are organised according to a particular disposal of covers and seats, with important implications on the conception and definition of the same eating experience. On the one hand, for example, Sansui seems to aim at carefully marking the boundaries of each eater’s intimate sphere, preferring individual placemats to tablecloths and predisposing a series of oppositions in terms of colours and materials between the shared space of the table—which can host up to 8 people in the Yakiniku room—and the private area reserved to each diner. Proper distances and/or dividing screens or awnings, moreover, generally separate the different tables, promoting polite isolation from eaters not sharing the same eating experience. On the other hand, in the case of Guu Izakaya, the adoption of long benches and the absence of individual placemats promote proximity among diners, favouring continuity and

¹⁰⁴ With the only exception of the Yakiniku Room, where two small single-seater tables are present, the table/counter represents a collective and shared space, where different people may consume their meal together (as in the case of voluntary shared tables) or just simultaneously (as in the case of sushi bars, which make even people not sharing the same eating experience share the same collective space of the counter, although with particular dynamics often marking their private sphere).

sharing rather than intimacy and privacy. Furthermore, the small distance established between the tables and seats makes the personal or even intimate distance—generally reserved to more or less close relationships within the observed semiospheres—supersede the social distance commonly adopted by public eating services for people not sharing the same experience. All the other considered case studies (either their tables or the sushi bars) could be located between these two extremes, which recall the opposition between the “traditional” Japanese conception of the meal as a private and intimate experience and the common Western idea of *commensality*,¹⁰⁵ based on sharing and conviviality.

Building on these observations, a crucial aspect related to the conception of space and the way the body experiences it, already partially emerged when dealing with the macro-spatial level, reveals itself more evidently. Generally referred to as *ma* (間), a Japanese word translatable as “gap”, “pause”, or “the space between two structural parts” (Yoshida and Nakamura 2013, s.v. Ma; cf. also Hall 1966, 152), the spatial concept is expressed in negative terms by the Japanese. *Ma* does not refer to compositional elements, but rather to the *intervals* between them, which are considered the basis of spatial progressive experience and designation. We will deal with the implications of such conception of space and its “translations” related to the eating experience in the following,¹⁰⁶ after having considered the micro-spatial level, where such mechanisms play a crucial role. Here it is sufficient to remark how the establishment of “intervals” (whose nature can be material, as in the case of awnings, but also chromatic, as for the covers, or even related to other aspects, such as the lighting, etc.) is essential for the definition of particular proxemic patterns and the same definition of private and collective spaces.

¹⁰⁵ From Medieval Latin *commensalis*, composed of *com* (archaic form of classical Latin *cum*), “together, together with”, and *mensa*, “table”, the term *commensal* refers to each person eating at the same table as other people (cf. Harper 2014). For further reflections on commensality, cf. in particular Boutaud 2004; 2005; Marrone and Giannitrapani 2012, 7–27.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. §5.4.

A series of *rituals*, moreover, intervene in the continuous redefinition of the space of the table, concerning particular dynamics between the actors involved in it. In different cases, in fact, drinks or plates are offered to customers, sometimes recalling the local habits (e.g. the water served at Guu Izakaya and Shinobu), sometimes evoking the Japanese foodsphere (both at the level of food-material, with the offering of typical Japanese foods such as small soups—e.g. Wasabi, Shinobu, Sansui—or sake—e.g. Ginger—, and with respect to the symbolic dimension—as clearly showed by the example of Arcadia, where the rolls offered to guests recall both the Japanese wrapping principle and the local foodsphere, as we will analyse more in depth in the following¹⁰⁷). The presence of *o-shiboris* (Wasabi and Sansui), moreover, is particularly remarkable. First of all, it recalls a series of practices of *care* of the body that are essential within the Japanese semiosphere, involving specific dynamics related to gender and hierarchical roles and relations. Such practices—which can also be combined with particular spatial configurations requiring waiters to “lower” themselves down to reach the eaters’ “level” (e.g. the tatami, both at Wasabi and Sansui), especially when they are sitting in spaces explicitly or implicitly defined “authentic” or closer to the Japanese “tradition”—seem to highlight the transitional and variable nature of waiters, whose role is therefore definable in terms of *in-betweenness* with respect to costumers and cooks.¹⁰⁸ On the other hand, a clear separation is maintained: waiters do not give *o-shiboris* directly to the eaters’ hands, but deliver the hot towels through the double intermediation of the table and of the stand where they are presented. This solution, echoed by the way in which food is served, prevents the actors involved in the eating experience from any physical contact, remarking the “distance” between their roles and recalling the Japanese

¹⁰⁷ Cf. §5.3.3.1.

¹⁰⁸ We will deal with the details and implications of this observation in the following. Cf. §5.4.

semiosphere.¹⁰⁹ Secondly, but not less importantly, *o-shibori* recalls the process of unwrapping of body analysed at the macro-level: people are here requested to unwrap of a further, immaterial layer, consisting in the impurities and dirties they have been contaminated with in the external space, in order to realise their performance inside the eating space of the table.

Finally, the important role played not only by the objects appearing on the table, but also—and above all—to their disposal and visual presentation, should be noticed. For instance, the choice of including elements typical of the local foodsphere (e.g. the bread/breadsticks or the cutlery on the tables of Arcadia, the water and particular tableware at Guu Izakaya, Shinobu, or Sansui—Yakiniku room), or of placing chopsticks in a vertical position (Arcadia) or without any chopstick rest or paper case usable to make it (Guu Izakaya) makes the process of translation evident and present throughout the eating experience. On the other hand, the attempt to recreate a sense of “tradition” and “authenticity” generally passes through the inclusion and a particular presentation of specific elements, as well as through a specific organisation of the spatial dimension of the table (e.g. the conveyor belt or the use of certain teapots at Ginger, the previously mentioned *o-shibori* at Sansui and Wasabi, the particular techniques of folding and presenting napkins adopted for the Sushi and Tatami rooms at Sansui, etc.). In any case, more or less evident cues of the processes of translation are identifiable. As time goes by, such processes are likely to deposit specific forms of textuality, transforming the same eating experience and the effects of meaning arising from it. Such aspects will be reconsidered in the conclusion of the chapter. Here, it is essential to point out that, even and especially with respect to the space of the table and the proxemic patterns

¹⁰⁹ Within which bodily contact (including hand-shaking, which, on the contrary, is usual in the Western countries) is strictly avoided in public space (cf. Argyle 1975 [1976], 90). Moreover, physical contact would imply a sort of contamination, while eliminating or avoiding impurities is precisely the aim of practices such as the offering of *o-shibori*. Cf. *infra*.

concerning it, the common distinction among *pre-ordered*—i.e. designed in view of particular uses—, *semi-determined*—lending themselves to be remodelled by their users—, and *informal*—seeming not to respond to any pre-existent projects—spaces not only loses its efficacy, but its same *raison d'être*. As Gianfranco Marrone (2001, 301–302) states, it is essential to consider cultural differences and, above all, to remember the impossibility of considering spatial meanings as decoded once and for all. The space of the table, more than others, shows us that, despite any attempt of establishing a Model User through particular spatial strategies aiming at guiding his decoding and consequent action on that same spatial text, resemantisation is potentially intrinsic of any practice of interpretation by the Empirical User. This has been already mentioned (at the macro-level) with respect to the need of creating lowered nooks for the legs according to the Western habits, but also in relation to the choice of some customers of overlooking them by refusing to use them (which, with the passage of time, could eventually lead the providers of the eating experience to further modify it). And it becomes even more evident and frequent as regards to the table, with people constantly reshaping not only its visual configuration according to their habits, therefore stimulating adjustments and translations of particular aspects (e.g. the positioning of chopsticks), but also its proxemic patterns, which are generally tacit and therefore more difficult to control and manage. Again, as we will discuss more in depth in the overall conclusions, meaning arises from differences, as it is precisely in the “gaps” or “intervals” between the Model User and the practices performed by empirical social subjects that “translation” processes are continuously enhanced and (spatial, but not only) meanings are incessantly resemantised.

5.3.3 The Micro-Level: Food, Plates, and Bodies

The last stage of the zoom movement underlying the present analysis implies considering the space of plates and the same presentation of food. This immediately recalls the material and visual dimension, as well as the body, whose importance has increasingly become manifest as we have moved from the macro-level of the restaurant to the space of the table.

A detailed review of all the plates offered at any restaurant does not match the aims of the present research and it would be impossible to adequately carry it out. According to what pointed out in the desk analysis, therefore, we decided to focus on the plates based on rice and, particularly, sushi, which plays a crucial role in *washoku* and has been described as the prototype of the so-called “wrapping principle”.¹¹⁰ The field analysis, moreover, highlighted the need to take into consideration the use and presentation of another particular ingredient, whose importance for *washoku*—with particular reference to seasonality and naturality—was pointed out when dealing with its basic ingredients:¹¹¹ the *eggplant*.¹¹² In the following we will therefore present the main aspects of the analysis of the plates based on these two fundamental foods, primarily focusing—as already mentioned—neither on the process of degustation nor on their recipes, but rather on their visual configuration and presentation to the customer, as well as on the way they seem to call specific practices of consumption and particular “techniques of the body”.

¹¹⁰ Cf. §4.5.3 and §4.5.4.

¹¹¹ Cf. §4.1.

¹¹² It is worthwhile to add that, although native to India, eggplants are widely used also in China, Japan, and many Mediterranean countries. Different varieties produce fruits of different size, shape, and colour. Nowadays, the most widely cultivated varieties in Europe and North America are elongated ovoid, around 4.7–9.8 in / 12–25 cm long and 2.4–3.5 in / 6–9 cm broad in a dark purple skin. Asian varieties include a much wider range of shapes, sizes and colours (white, yellow, green, dark purple, etc.), and are usually shaped like narrower, slightly pendulous cucumbers. Particularly, Japanese eggplants have thin skins, and a delicate flavour; their shape is quite similar to that of the Chinese variety, but they are bitterer and their skin is darker. Also small Italian eggplants are listed among their possible substitutes, although they are less oblong and larger (but not as large as the American type) (cf. Tsao and Lo 2004, 18). For more details and pictures, cf. www.foodsubs.com/Eggplants.html.

5.3.3.1 Arcadia

Arcadia offers a great variety of tableware as regards to the Japanese cuisine.¹¹³ Most of the plates and bowls are clearly visible to people eating at the sushi bar (Fig. 56): bamboo or wooden plates, ceramic dishes, different bowls, and wooden sushi boats¹¹⁴ surround the central area where the cooks prepare sushi and other foods, allowing them to easily pick up the most appropriate platter for each course. Moreover, as mentioned before, a small soy sauce dish is present on the table since the beginning of the eating experience, with significant differences between the sushi bar and the common tables.¹¹⁵



Figure 114 – (Roll Appetizer), Arcadia.

After sitting at the sushi bar—or, in the case of tables, after having expressed their preference for the Japanese cuisine—, customers are offered

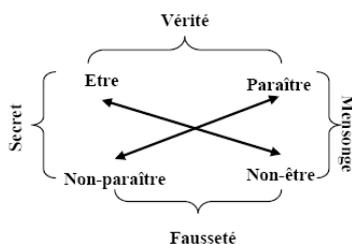
¹¹³ No particular differences distinguish the dishes or bowls used for serving foods to the tables from those adopted at the sushi bar. By contrast, the choice seems to be related to the type of food served and to the particular taste of the cooks preparing the course. Generally wooden platters seem to be used more for the table than for the counter, but there is no formalised rule for that.

¹¹⁴ The so-called “wooden sushi boats”, very common in Western countries, are not widely used in Japan, but represent a trace left by translation processes over time. For this reason, we decided to overlook the courses presented in these platters.

¹¹⁵ Cf. §5.3.2.1.

an appetizer, consisting in three fried rolls with *nori* wrapping a previously cooked timbale of chicken and cheese. Translation is immediately evident: at the level of food-material, meat substitutes fish, together with cheese, which is not commonly used for traditional sushi. Moreover, rice completely disappears, marking the appetizer in terms of *illusion* or *lie* with respect to the veridictory square:¹¹⁶ it *seems* sushi, but it *is not*. Its structure further enhances this idea: the wrapping principle is still identifiable, with an external fried layer enclosing the seaweed, which, in turn, wraps the interior. By contrast, the latter abandons the orderly and structured configuration generally characterising sushi, making the centre not properly recognisable (both at the visual and gustatory level). Finally, no raw elements are included in the course, with the exception of the lettuce leaf on which the three rolls lean. More than a proper component of the course, such leaf represents a sort of adornment or edible decoration recalling the local taste for the presentation of plates.

¹¹⁶ The veridictory square (or square of veridiction) visually expresses the opposition being/seeming, describing four veridictory statuses: *truth* (being + seeming), *falsehood* (not-being + not-seeming), *illusion/lie* (not-being + seeming), and *secret* (being + not-seeming).



(Greimas and Courtés 1979, s.v. Vérédiction; cf. also Courtés 1991).



Figure 115 – “Caterpillar” and “Crunchy Maki”, Arcadia.

Within the other rice-based courses listed on the menu, some appear particularly interesting. For instance, *caterpillar* (Fig. 115, top), which is described as a “roll composed of smoked eel, asparagus, and avocado” (*roll di anguilla affumicata, asparagi e avocado* [translation mine]) in the menu, consists of a heart of cooked eel and raw avocado enclosed by a layer of *nori*, which is in turn wrapped by rice. Some partial layers (a first one, made of sliced avocado, and a second one, even more partial and discontinuous, consisting of grated cheese) cover the topside of each roll, with interesting implications both at the material and symbolic level. As regards to the food-material, while the inclusion of eel makes reference to the Japanese foodsphere, avocado recalls the already formalised Western “translation” of sushi.¹¹⁷ By contrast, asparagus, which are widely used and appreciated within the local foodsphere, represent an element of food innovation—or,

¹¹⁷ Cf. §4.5.2.5.

better, *fusion*¹¹⁸—implying not already formalised processes of adaptation. The same could be applied even to cheese, as we do not find here the common creamy cheese used in some Western-style versions of sushi, but rather a drier cheese, grated and sprinkled on the rolls exactly as it is generally scattered over pasta. Such transformations have remarkable implications on the main semantic oppositions characterising sushi. The centre, generally hosting principally raw ingredients, is in this case composed of cooked foods, including the vegetable ingredients (asparagus). Raw avocado is instead used to enclose the rolls, making them slick and therefore more difficult to pick up with chopsticks. The resulting structure (Fig. 116) seems therefore to eliminate the gradualness typical of sushi.¹¹⁹ a humid cooked heart is wrapped by semi-humid culturalised nori and, then, by semi-humid culturalised rice, which are in turn enclosed by a partial coat of raw (humid) avocado, further covered by a discontinuous layer of grated (dry) cheese (representing the most elaborate ingredient of the roll, as it is the result of multiple operations including milking, curdling, cooking, aging, grating, and sprinkling).

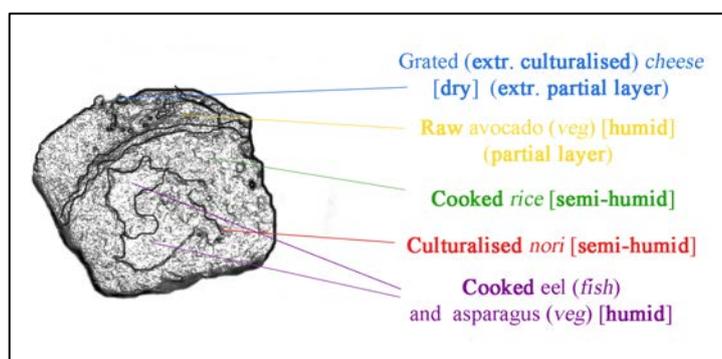


Figure 116 – Structural configuration of the caterpillar
(from the most external—top—to the most internal—bottom—components).

¹¹⁸ In relation to food, the term *fusion* refers to “a style of cooking which combines traditional Western techniques and ingredients with those used in Eastern cuisine: *fusion cuisine, fusion food*” (Collins 2014).

¹¹⁹ Cf. §4.5.3.

As regards to the composition of the plate, the different rolls (8 in total) are disposed in diagonal neatly forming 4 rows very close (almost adjacent) to each other. Finally, it should be noted that wasabi and *gari*, leaning on a lettuce leaf that recalls the local taste for the adornment of plates, are placed on one side of the dish, in order not to touch the rolls and consequently alter their flavour. Customers can therefore decide to use them or not, in addition to the soy sauce, which remains present throughout the entire eating experience but in a different dish, filled in by the same customers any time they want to do it.

Another interesting case is the *crunchy maki* (Fig. 115, bottom), which is described as a “crunchy roll made of shrimp, crab, and tobiko sauce” (*croccante roll di gamberi, granchio e salsa tobiko* [translation mine]) in the *carte* of the restaurant. Its structural configuration is similar to that of the *caterpillar*, although different ingredients are used, introducing significant variations. A partial layer of raw (humid) salmon, surmounted by a few toasted sesame seeds (creating a discontinuous dry cooked layer), wraps a layer of semi-humid culturalised rice and another one of semi-humid culturalised nori, in its turn enclosing a heart made of a deep-fried prawn (whose crunchiness, despite the name of the course, is partially reduced by the humid elements surrounding it) and the inclusion of a sauce. The latter is particularly interesting as, although its name—“tobiko sauce”—recalls a fundamental ingredient of *washoku*, such ingredient is not present in it. The cocktail sauce, widely used with shrimps within the Italian foodsphere, is named after the common natural red-orange coloured tobiko because of its chromatic configuration, but without any material correspondence. Again, therefore, *illusion* characterises sushi, making it *seem* what it *is not*. Moreover, even in this case a double-level translation can be individuated, as if the sauce introduces an element of novelty recalling the local habits, the external layer of raw salmon evoke the pre-existing transposition of the Alaska roll. Finally, as regards both the wrapping structure and the

arrangement of rolls in the space of the plate, the same considerations made for the *caterpillar* could be applied to this dish.



Figure 117 – “Haru maki”, Arcadia.

The *haru maki* is generally served on wooden plates¹²⁰ (such as the one depicted in Fig. 117), with wasabi and *gari* lean directly on their surface, without the intermediation of common lettuce leaf or any other garnishment generally characterising the composition of foods disposed in the ceramic plates. A very interesting feature of this course is its denomination, which recalls the Asian—and, specifically, Chinese—“spring rolls” (as the literal translation of *harumaki* suggests) widely consumed in Western countries too. The name makes reference to the wrapping principle characterising both plates, although sushi differs not only with respect to ingredients, but also to their visual configuration, as the rolls are fragmented into easy-to-take sections making their interior visible. In this case, therefore, the fragmentation typical of sushi and requested by its same practices of consumption intervenes in its visual presentation, breaking the illusion created by the menu and making it *seem* what it *is* (truth). The external layer of rice dough wrapping the roll, moreover, makes it particularly crunchy, re-

¹²⁰ Most of the plates served at the tables, moreover, are presented on wooden platters as the one depicted in Figure 117. However, as mentioned in the previous, there is no fixed rule for the usage of particular platters, which rather depends on cooks’ choices.

establishing the gradualness typical of traditional sushi both with respect to humidness (which reaches its maximum at the centre, made of fresh raw fish and avocado) and in relation to flavour (with the most internal ingredients coinciding with the savoury heart of the roll).



Figure 118 – “Salmon and Tuna Temaki”, Arcadia.

Arcadia offers also different types of *temaki*, which are presented in specific wooden *temaki* stands hosting from one to three rolls each (Fig. 118). It is interesting that, in this case, only ginger, placed in a corner of the horizontal part of the stand, is served to customers (together with the soy sauce, always present on the table), while wasabi completely disappears. Moreover, the lettuce leaf generally used to garnish plates becomes here a real component of the course, joining the other ingredients wrapped by the external crunchy layer of nori.¹²¹ As the example of “salmon, tuna, and avocado temaki” (*temaki con salmone, tonno e avocado* [translation mine]) depicted in Fig. 118 shows, the internal ingredients noticeably come out of

¹²¹ Which is dried and treated according to its common practices of preparation, and therefore partially elaborate. On the other hand, according to the analysis carried out in Chapter 4, its use in *temakis* would be closer to the pole of Nature compared to its use in *uramakis*, where the humidness of rice alters its previously obtained dry nature, moving it closer to the pole of both humidness and Culture.

the roll, making it hard to eat it according to Japanese habits, which would require customers to take it in their hands, eventually fill it with soy sauce, *gari*, and/or eventually wasabi,¹²² and finally close it on the top, using the highest part of nori.¹²³ With respect to the material dimension, it should be mentioned that, although salmon is explicitly mentioned as one of the main ingredients of the plate, it is not present in the form of fish, but only in the form of roe. Moreover, other variations of *temaki* make the translation process even more visible: the “Spicy Tuna Temaki” includes a spicy sauce (*salsa piccante*) whose consistency recalls mayonnaise, while the “Ika Temaki” evokes the Mediterranean tradition including fried calamari (*roll di calamari fritti e avocado*).



Figure 119 – “Chirashi Sushi”, Arcadia.

Finally, it is worthwhile to consider the case of *chirashi* sushi (Fig. 119). Named according its original denomination¹²⁴ and served in the traditional lacquerware bowl, whose golden decorations recall the bamboo plant and

¹²² Which in this case is absent, as mentioned in the previous.

¹²³ Although no explanation is given to customers, who can therefore refer to their own encyclopaedia for consuming the course.

¹²⁴ *Chirashi* sushi or *chirazisushi*.

the importance of naturality for *washoku*, it represents the case where “tradition” is more evident. Fresh raw and cooked slices of fish (raw tuna, salmon, and seabass; cooked prawn, octopus, and eel) and raw vegetables (grated carrots, sliced cucumber, and lettuce, which represents the “breaking” element) are disposed on two layers of strips of *nori* and *wakame*¹²⁵ and sushi rice, which are totally “wrapped”¹²⁶ by the same fish, on the one hand, and the bowl, on the other hand. Wasabi and *gari* are both placed in a corner, partially touching some of the slices of fish. By contrast, a sharp difference concerns its practices of consumption: when eaten at the sushi bar, *chirashi* sushi can be consumed using the chopsticks or the white ceramic spoon whose need customers are asked about by the cooks; on the contrary, no questions are necessary in the case of tables, where, as mentioned before, the metal spoon generally used in Western country is automatically brought to the table, as for any plate potentially implying its use.

5.3.3.2 Wasabi

Partially reduced as regards to its variety, the tableware adopted at Wasabi is particularly interesting for its design. Wood and bamboo platters are largely used (Fig. 120), especially for assortments of sushi (no boats are adopted in this case). In addition to them, there are different types of bowls (made of dark ceramic or lacquerware) and generally opaque ceramic, stoneware, or even metal plates that can assume different forms.

¹²⁵ *Wakame* is a sweet edible seaweed largely used in Japan and other Asian countries, particularly in salads and soups. The main difference distinguishing *wakame* from *nori* is that the former, although usually sold in dried form, is soaked in water before usage.

¹²⁶ And therefore not visible.



Figure 120 – Assorted makis and nigiris, Wasabi.

Makis, for example, are generally served on stone plates with the shape of a leaf (Fig. 121), recalling the centrality of nature in the Japanese semiosphere and cuisine. Great attention is generally paid also to the chromatic dimension: while assortments are presented on neutral wooden surfaces enhancing their visual variability (Fig. 120), separately asked types of sushi are placed on different plates, establishing interesting chromatic rhymes and contrasts (Fig. 121). If plastic elements adorn combinations of *makis* and *nigiris*, moreover, no particular natural or artificial garnishments are used for the dishes hosting specific typologies of sushi. On the other hand, in both cases only *gari* is placed at one corner of the dish, while wasabi is apparently absent. Tasting, however, reveals its presence, characterising sushi in terms of *secret* (being + not-seeming): even though it is not identifiable by sight (because of the layers completely wrapping it), wasabi reveals itself to the tongue, creating an effect of surprise enhanced by the fact that no mention is made—either in the menu or at the level of social subjects—of its presence.



Figure 121 – “Ebi California” (top) and “Shakeawamaki” (bottom), Wasabi.

Finally, it should be noticed that rolls are always placed with one lateral side leaning on the plate, in a perpendicular angle with respect to the common disposition adopted at Arcadia. This seems to be related to the different position of the eater with respect to food: while the tables¹²⁷ and, especially, the counter at Arcadia makes sushi be at the customers’ eye-level, the particular position of tables and seats at Wasabi (especially in the tatami room) brings people in a higher position with respect to plates. It is also very interesting to consider the different forms assumed by *makis*, which appear here not so well defined and rounded as in the case of Arcadia. This gives the impression of a just made food product, of a sort of work of art that cannot be reduced to any standardised or fixed form. Every roll is potentially different from the other, re-evoking a special “aura” that, contrasting any attempt of adaptation or translation, seems to metaphorically recall “authenticity” and “tradition”. Furthermore, a remarkable feature of

¹²⁷ Where wooden platters higher than the ones adopted at Wasabi are generally used (cf. Figs. 117 and 120).

the menu seems to enhance such vision: the dishes depicted in Fig. 120 are described as *Shakekawamaki — Alghe arrotolato con riso e salmone alla griglia* (literally, “Shakekawamaki — Wrapped seaweed with rice and grilled salmon [translation mine]) and *Ebi California — Alghe arrotolato con riso e gamberi e avocado* (literally, “Ebi California — Wrapped seaweed with rice, shrimps, and avocado” [translation mine]), with different errors concerning gender and number concordance of the names and adjectives used. Beyond the linguistic encyclopaedia of the Empirical Authors of the *carte*—who could have certainly asked for confirmation to local speakers before formalising the menu in the form it is given to customers—, at the level of textual strategies a particular purpose seems to emerge. The inclusion of not exactly translated or inflected Italian forms suggests the idea of a basilar difficulty underlying translation processes, which do not seem able to reproduce exactly what the original words (or, at a different level, plates) stand for. Moreover, it is interesting to notice the emphasis put on the idea of wrapping: *makis* are not described as rice-based dishes, but rather as dishes centred on seaweed, which wraps different ingredients, including rice. Finally, it should be added that, unlike Arcadia, neither soy sauce dish nor dispenser are present on the table when customers sit at the table. They are brought and firstly served to customers by waiters only in conjunction with sushi (cf. Fig. 123, in the background).



Figure 122 – “Unaghi Ippon”, Wasabi.

The *Unaghi Ippon* (Fig. 122) is remarkable for different reasons. First of all, its denomination¹²⁸ significantly recalls the local orthography: principal ingredient of the plate is the eel, a common ingredient in Japanese cooking, generally referred to as *unagi* in Japanese. The inclusion of “h” in the transliteration of the Japanese word is due to the attempt of suggesting its correct pronunciation by means of the common Italian orthographic rules, according to which it is necessary to add “h” after the letter “g” when it is followed by the vowels “i” or “e” in order to keep the voiced velar plosive [g] (as in the Italian words “gallo” or “ghiro”) instead of the voiced postalveolar affricate [dʒ] (as in the Italian words “giallo” or “giro”)¹²⁹. The description of the dish, “roasted eel on sushi rice and avocado” (*anguilla arrosto su riso di sushi e avocado* [translation mine]), moreover, reveals the presence of an ingredient that is not visible, leading secret to *truth* (seeming-being) and stressing the importance of the menu for the competence of the eater. But yet the secret is kept in the case of wasabi, wrapped by avocado and rice, and not mentioned in the menu. Finally, it should be said that, in this case, even *gari* disappears, as the (traditional) practices of consumption of the plate do not include it. No further garnishment is added, creating a simple visual configuration principally based on chromatic rhymes (with the brown hues recalling the different nuances of the roasted eel).

¹²⁸ The second word, *ippon*, which means “skewer”, refers to the practices of preparation of eel, and is not altered in any way. The following observations make reference to the first word used to describe the plate, *unaghi*, which is subjected to interesting changes as regards to its transliterated form.

¹²⁹ The same can be observed for the word *nigiri*, spelled *nighiri* in the menu of Wasabi.



**Figure 123 – “Temaki” (“Salmone + Avocado” e “Gamberi + Avocado”)
[“Salmon & Avocado” and “Shrimps and Avocado”], Wasabi.**

Even at Wasabi, *temakis* are served with the common red and black wooden stand (Fig. 123). Differences are introduced with respect to their ingredients, as no particular variations or adaptations to the local foodsphere are offered.¹³⁰ Furthermore, the ingredients wrapped by the cone made of *nori* occupy only a part of it, allowing eaters to easily pour it with soy sauce,¹³¹ if wanted, and close it before taking it in their hands and eat it, as the waiters explain to customers when bringing the stand to the table.

¹³⁰ The menu includes the following fillings for temaki: salmon (with or without avocado), cooked or raw shrimps (with or without avocado), gilthead bream, seabass, or salmon roe.

¹³¹ It should be noted that neither *gari* nor wasabi are offered as condiments in this case. Again, while the former one is not considered appropriate for the consumption of the dish, the latter is already present among the other ingredients (although no mention is made to it in the menu or by the waiters).



Figure 124 – “Chirashi”, Wasabi.

With *chirashi* (Fig. 124), wasabi abandons secrecy and reveals itself together with ginger, on the top of the vegetables and fish slices surmounting the layer of sushi rice contained in the typical lacquerware bowls decorated with golden bamboo branches. Compared to the *chirashi* sushi served at Arcadia, the one offered by Wasabi presents some differences: as regards to vegetables, carrots are substituted by avocado, while lettuce is replaced by valerian salad. Moreover the layer of *nori* disappears. With respect to sushi, an important variation concerns the presence of a raw shrimp in addition to the cooked prawn, as well as the substitution of eel with crunched grilled salmon (which is recurrent in the menu). Finally, it should be mentioned that, with respect to the practices of consumption, no spoon is provided and, even when customers ask for it, they are kindly invited to try to eat *chirashi* using chopsticks.



Figure 125 – “Nasuden”, Wasabi.

Another element of novelty with respect to the previously analysed Italian case study is the presence of a plate principally based on eggplant: *Nasuden*, described as a “fried eggplant [with¹³²] miso sauce” (*melanzana fritto su salsa di miso* [translation mine]). The plate, consisting in a half big eggplant¹³³ fried and covered by a thick layer of soy sauce scattered with sesame seeds, is particularly interesting because it represents the only course served with a metal spoon, even though it has previously been partially segmented into smaller morsels (Fig. 125). Although missing on the table and not required by customers, the common western cutlery is introduced in the ethnic experience, along with chopsticks, as the same practices of consumption of food—and the translation processes involved by them—, in their recurring over time, have caused its inclusion, formalising new forms of textuality

¹³² Literally, it should be translated as “on”, subverting the order underlying the presentation of the plate, where the eggplant is surmounted by miso sauce. Moreover, there is no concordance between the feminine noun and the masculine adjective.

¹³³ The typical Italian cultivar, which produces larger fruits compared to the typical Japanese plant.

5.3.3.3 Guu Izakaya

Eggplants are available also at Guu Izakaya, where they are served in white ceramic plates, as all the other courses. With a few exceptions, in fact, no particular tableware is used, while more variety characterises the glassware, declined according to the particular type of cocktail or beverage served. In the particular case of *Nasu Miso* (Fig. 126), described in the fixed menu as a “deep fried eggplant w/ sweet miso sauce”, a small square dish is used.



Figure 126 – “Nasu Miso”, Guu Izakaya.

At the material level, the most evident difference distinguishing the *nasu miso* served at Guu Izakaya from the *nasuden* offered by Wasabi consists in the type of eggplant used, which has particular implications on the practices of preparation and consumption of the plate. Due to their large availability on the Canadian market, Asian varieties are here preferred to the common North American and European cultivars, which are larger and more ovoid. This makes it impossible to prepare the eggplant as it is served at Wasabi, because its diameter is too small. The vegetable is therefore cut into thick

slices, completely separating each morsel from the others, which allows eaters to easily pick them up using chopsticks.¹³⁴ Moreover, the miso sauce is here much more liquid, which makes it trickle down toward the bottom of the container, somehow “wrapping” all the slices, although with a less visible layer. Finally, chives—which are widely used within the Canadian foodsphere—substitute sesame seeds, altering the flavour of the plate according to the local taste.

As regards to sushi, the first important element that should be remarked is that it is not included within the fixed list of dishes offered by the restaurant, occasionally appearing only on the menu of the day. This is particularly interesting, as it overthrows the common predominance of such food in Japanese restaurants in favour of mainly cooked courses including meat, fish, soups, noodles, and different rice-based plates. Nonetheless different options are occasionally presented on the menu of the day, generally including interesting forms of *fusion* with the local foodsphere.



Figure 127 – “Karaage Roll”, Guu Izakaya (© Guu Izakaya).

In the so-called “Karaage Roll”, for example, an external layer of rice (just partially sprinkled with a few sesame seeds) encloses a strip of *nori* in

¹³⁴ So that no spoon is provided in this case.

its turn wrapping a heart made of lettuce and *karaage*¹³⁵ chicken. The adaptation to the local taste is evident not only in the ingredients used—which nonetheless maintain a certain degree of gradualness with respect to both the oppositions Nature/Culture and dry/humid—, but also in the seasoning accompanying the course: mayonnaise. The presence of lemon, generally included only in *chirashi*, further enhances this aspect, recalling the common local habit of squeezing it on fried meat or fish. The processes of “translation” are therefore exalted in this case, which is reflected by the position of the 6 rolls, allowing eaters to look at them from different points of view. On the contrary, the tableware seems to recall naturality and the Japanese foodsphere.

No other variety of *maki* or *nigiri* was encountered during the period of observation. However, rice appeared in different versions of *chirashi sushi* or *donburi*.



Figure 128 – “Chirashi Don”, Guu Izakaya.

¹³⁵ The Japanese cooking technique known as *kaarage* consists in deep frying in oil various foods—most often chicken, but also other meat and fish—after having marinated them in a mix of soy sauce, garlic, and/or ginger, and having coated them with a seasoned wheat flour or potato starch mix.

Chirashi Don (Fig. 128), presented as “special assorted sashimi on sushi rice”, is served in a white ceramic bowl, with a white ceramic spoon, and a small dish with two separate sections for soy sauce and wasabi (Fig. 128). The first remarkable aspect concerns the same denomination of the plate: *donburi* (丼, literally “bowl”), frequently abbreviated as “don”, consists in a rice bowl dish including fish, meat, vegetables and/or other ingredients served over rice. Specifically, *Kaisendon* (海鮮丼) is a bowl composed of thinly sliced sashimi (and occasionally fish roe) on rice. One of the main differences distinguishing *kaisendon* from *chirashizushi* concerns the rice:¹³⁶ while the former is made with plain steamed rice, the latter contains sushi rice. The denomination of the plate therefore reveals a sort of paradox. Moreover, its description states the presence of sushi rice, suggesting that the word *don* was probably used to make reference to the container where food is served, which is itself generally referred to as *donburi* or *don*. As regards to food-material, fish variety is here reduced to some slices of salmon, seabass, and tuna, in addition to salmon roe. Vegetables include cucumber, white cabbage, and ornamental chives. With respect to the structural configuration of the plate, it should be remarked that seaweed is not placed between the rice and the fish, but rather sprinkled, in very small strips, all over the plate, breaking the wrapping structure generally characterising the plate and generating a visual “disorder” making the course resemble a salad. Moreover, as mentioned before, wasabi is not included in the dish, but placed in a different container, while *gari* is totally absent. Finally, the disappearance of lemon is remarkable, as it enhances what stated before in relation to its use within the local foodsphere.

¹³⁶ Another important difference concerns the opposition raw/cooked, as fish, meat, vegetables and other ingredients are simmered or cooked in different ways before being served on rice in *donburi*.



Figure 129 – “Unagi Chirashi Don”, Guu Izakaya.

*Unagi Chirashi Udon*¹³⁷ (Fig. 129) consists in “grilled eel and simmered salmon on rice”. On the one hand, it recalls a very common Japanese course, *unadon* (sometimes spelled *unagidon*), which is a *donburi* dish with sliced eel served on a bed of rice. On the other hand, the presence of salmon—widely consumed within the local foodsphere—introduces an element of novelty, adapting it to the local taste. The chromatic and structural configuration of the plate further enhances this aspect, making it look like a salad, exactly as in the previously described case. Moreover, wasabi and soy sauce are substituted by thinly sliced celery, crumbled white onions, and candied ginger, marking a further estrangement from the Japanese “tradition”.



Figure 130 – “Karubi Don”, Guu Izakaya.

¹³⁷ The same considerations we made about the *chirashi don* (cf. *supra*) could be applied to the denomination of this plate.

The same could be said for the *Karubi Don* (Fig. 130), introduced as “Japanese Style BBQ Beef Rib on Rice”, where meat substitutes fish, also introducing another innovation: the usage of barbecue sauce, very common in Canada. Moreover, salad is added to the plate, preventing people from seeing the rice and making the plate *seeming* what it *is not* (in other words, giving the *illusion/lie* of a meat course laying on salad). The three vegetables accompanying the dish further enhance its adaptation to the local foodsphere. As regards to the denomination of the plate, moreover, it should be noticed that the word “chirashi” disappears: this is the case of a proper *donburi*, including cooked meat and plain steamed rice. On the other hand, the previously mentioned aspects make it differ from traditional *donburis*, stressing the effect of “translation” processes.



Figure 131 – “Chef Takuro’s Duck Risotto”, Guu Izakaya (© Guu Izakaya).

Sometimes, finally, rice is totally resemantised: in *Chef Takuro’s Duck Risotto* (Fig. 131), for instance, no particular Japanese connotation seems to be kept,¹³⁸ as both its denomination, assuming Italian inflections, and the type of rice¹³⁹ used prove.

¹³⁸ The same use of duck meat refers more to China and other Asian countries, where it is widely eaten, than to Japan.

¹³⁹ To which the Japanese would refer in terms of *gaimai*, “foreign rice” (cf. §4.4.2).

5.3.3.4 Shinobu

As at Guu Izakaya, even at Shinobu tableware mainly consists in white ceramic dishes without any decoration. Only the bowls, as well as the glasses used for tea (Fig. 133, top), are decorated with blue ornamental motifs.



Figure 132 – Assorted Sushi, Shinobu.

Also in the case of sushi assortments (Fig. 132), no wooden platters or any other particular dish is used, preferring simple white ceramic dishes of different forms. Within the plate, no particular food decorations are used: only wasabi and *gari*, generally placed at the extremities of the dish, accompany *nigiris* and *makis*, which are positioned obliquely, sticking to each other. As mentioned in the previous, moreover, white ceramic soy sauce dispensers and small dishes remain available on the table throughout the entire eating experience.

With respect to the supply of sushi, in addition to the most common *nigiris* (tuna, seabass, salmon, gilthead bream, *tamagoyaki*,¹⁴⁰ etc., cf. Fig. 132), we can find different types of *makis* (referred to as *sushi rolls*), which generally introduce remarkable variations. Even California rolls, although keeping the same denomination of the common American adaptation of Japanese *makis*—where avocado is used instead of or together with raw fish, especially salmon—, are subject to a radical change in relation to food-

¹⁴⁰ The Japanese omelette *tamagoyaki* (卵焼き, literally “grilled egg”, also known as *tamago* or *dashimaki*) is made by rolling together several layers of cooked eggs. Consumed in different forms and variants, it can be found outside Japan mainly in the form of *nigiri*.

material, coming to host avocado, cucumber, or fish cake at their centre, as well as an external layer of tobiko wrapping them. More evident changes affect the other rolls, which come to assume a spicy characterisation (e.g. spicy tuna roll), when not a completely vegetarian connotation (e.g. avocado rolls, cucumber rolls, avocado and tofu rolls, and sweet potatoes rolls). Many plates, moreover, include crunchy components, such as tempura or other fried ingredients (e.g. the last two veggie rolls, the spider roll, which contains crab tempura, the shrimps tempura rolls, etc.).



Figure 133 – “Volcano Rainbow Rolls”, Shinobu.

Crispiness reaches its peak with the “Volcano Rainbow rolls” (Fig. 133), which find no particular linguistic description in the menu, except that they are served with honey sauce. By contrast, the visual dimension (cf. Fig. 45, forth page) offers more details about the plate, introducing its practices of preparation: the rolls are brought to the table by the waiter who, after pouring some honey sauce on them, caramelize their topside with a small blowtorch (Fig. 133, top). Such practice recalls what stated by Roland

Barthes in *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption* (1961):

The Americans¹⁴¹ seem to oppose the category of sweet [...] with an equally general category that is not, however, that of *salty*—understandably so, since their food is salty and sweet to begin with—but that of *crisp* or *crispy*. *Crisp* designates everything that crunches, crackles, grates, sparkles [...]. Quite obviously, such a notion goes beyond the purely physical nature of the product; *crispiness* in a food designates an almost magical quality, a certain briskness and sharpness, as opposed to the soft, soothing character of sweet foods. (ET 1997, 23)

In the case of the Volcano Rainbow Rolls such opposition is overcome thanks to the same practices of preparation of food, which significantly take place before the eaters' eyes. The intervention of fire, whose contact with sushi is intermediated by the honey sauce, marks the passage from Nature to Culture not exactly in terms of raw/cooked (after caramelising with the blowtorch, in fact, only the superficial parts of the toppings—salmon and avocado—abandon their raw status because of the heat generated by the flame), but rather in terms of *smooth/crispy*. It is precisely the honey (*sweet*) sauce that, reacting to fire, makes the transformation from the *soft, soothing* character of the topline (avocado and salmon, as well as the same honey poured on them) of the rolls to a *crunchy, crackling, sparkling*—in other words, *crispy*—layer “wrapping” them possible. On the other hand, the contrast smooth vs. crunchy is partially kept by the presence of the melted sauce trickling at the bottom of sushi (Fig. 133, bottom), according to a

¹⁴¹ The same could be said with respect to the Canadian foodsphere, which has been largely influenced by the American one.

high/low axis. An important implication of such transformation should be remarked: before the intervention of fire, the slick character of rolls—due to the presence of raw humid toppings, such as avocado and salmon, and, above all, by the sweet honey sauce poured on them—would make it difficult to pick them up using chopsticks. The transformation caused by the process of caramelising (fire + intermediation of the same sauce) eliminates such slickness, making the sweet flavour of the sauce, as well as its smooth character, slide to the bottom of each roll, therefore facilitating the action of chopsticks. In other words, this process—significantly performed before customers’ eyes—seems to bring an act of “translation” (the addition of honey sauce, as well as the structural alteration of *maki*, with salmon and avocado—in turn recalling a previous adaptation to the local foodsphere—abandoning the heart of sushi to partially wrap it from the outside), which would make it impossible, or at least difficult, to adopt the traditional practices of consumption, back to tradition (the possibility of easily using chopsticks). At the same time, it allows to keep the reference to the local foodsphere, adding to the already mentioned elements another, crucial component: *crispiness*. “Translation” and “tradition” are therefore presented as complementary, precisely thanks to the action of the providers of the eating experience.



Figure 134 – “Spicy Salmon Don”, Shinobu.

The case of the bowls of rice, here presented as *donburi*, although containing sushi rice and raw fish (as stated by the menu and remarked by the waiter), is partially different. In the particular case depicted in Fig. 134, *Spicy Salmon Don* is described as “spicy salmon, sesame, flying fish roe, sushi rice”, with one of the recurring orthographical errors characterising the menu, which recalls the dynamics discussed about the case of Wasabi. The presence of *nori* further enhances the proximity to *chirashi* sushi, although, abandoning the usual intermediate position it has in *chirashi* bowls, it seems here a sort of decoration, untidily disposed along the border of the container, in an upper position. This distances the seaweed from the pole of Culture with respect to its usage in *chirashi*, where the humidity of the two layers enclosing it (humid raw fish, above, and semi-humid cooked rice, below) re-humidify the previously dried vegetable. Moreover, as mentioned in the case of Guu Izakaya, the visual configuration of the bowls seems to suggest the idea of a salad, although in this case the presence of wasabi and *gari* on the top of fish and the absence of any particular local ingredient strengthen the relation with the Japanese “tradition”. On the other hand, the spicy character of the plate, strongly remarked by its denomination, recalls the local taste. Finally, as regards the practices of consumption, a white ceramic spoon is brought to the table together with the bowl, as the visual dimension of the menu (Fig. 45) anticipates.

Moving from rice to eggplants, Shinobu is the only example offering more than one course containing them. *Nasu Dengaku* (Fig. 135), described as a “Japanese Style, lightly fried eggplant with dengaku miso sauce” corresponds to what is called *nasuden* at Wasabi and *nasu miso* at Guu Izakaya. Actually, the original name of the plate prepared in Japan is precisely *Nasu Dengaku*, also known as *nasuden*¹⁴² (cf. in particular Tsuji 1980 [2006], 194). Even in this case, on the material side, the common

¹⁴² While Wasabi and Shinobu opt for the original name of the plate, therefore, Guu Izakaya maintains only the Japanese word for eggplant (*nasu*), insisting on the other fundamental component of the plate: *miso* sauce.

Japanese elongated eggplants are used, which brings cooks to cut them crosswise in thick circular slices. Unlike Guu Izakaya’s *nasu miso*, however, the eggplant “wraps” the sauce, which assumes a more solid configuration (as in the case of Wasabi). Every slide is lightly carved on the top, creating a nook for the sauce, which is surmounted by a partial layer of sesame seeds and some chives, with a double reference to *washoku*, on the one hand, and to the local taste, on the other hand. Finally, it should be noted that, although cut into slides, the eggplant is arranged on the plate according to its natural configuration, which suggests the idea of the practices of preparation of food as processes allowing and facilitating their consumption—according to the common Japanese habits, that is, using chopsticks—, but at the same time keeping as close as possible to nature.¹⁴³



Figure 135 – “Nasu Dengaku”, Shinobu.

Nasu Hosami-age (Fig. 136), by contrast, reintroduces the centrality of crispiness: here a larger ovoid eggplant¹⁴⁴ is cut lengthwise into different slices, stuffed, and finally deep fried, as the menu clarifies.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Which, it should be remembered, represents a crucial aspect of *washoku*.

¹⁴⁴ The typical North American cultivar.

¹⁴⁵ “Deep fried, stuffed eggplant”.



Figure 136 – “Nasu Hosami-age”, Shinobu.

On the other hand, no information is provided about the filling—generally consisting in chicken (cf. Tsuji 1980 [2006], 415–416), as confirmed by the field analysis—, making it necessary to resort eaters’ encyclopaedia or, when necessary, to ask waiters for more details. What is particularly interesting is that the search for crunchiness requires cooks not only to opt for the North American variety¹⁴⁶ instead of the common Japanese cultivar, but also to place the sauce—which, in this case, assumes a more liquid character—in a separate container, not to make it humidify the crispy layer wrapping each slice.

5.3.3.5 Ginger

As mentioned in the previous, in the case of Ginger two dining rooms offer customers different eating experiences: as regards to food, the “A la Carte” room provides eaters with a variety of plates including just a few simple traditional *nigiris* and *makis* introduced by the menu; in the Sushi room, instead, different innovative versions of sushi and a few other courses¹⁴⁷ are served through a conveyor belt without any pre-set menu.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ As common as the Asian varieties in Toronto.

¹⁴⁷ *Edamame* (soybeans), soups, sashimi, and two types of *tartare*.

¹⁴⁸ For this reason the names of the plates served in this area, which are related to their main ingredients, appear in brackets.

We will focus in the following on the latter, considering some of the most meaningful plates of sushi.¹⁴⁹

First of all, it should be mentioned that all courses are served in small individual light grey ceramic plates, with a visual system expressing price categories: on each dish a series of fishes—from one (for the cheapest option) to eight (for the most expensive one)—clarifies the price of each plate¹⁵⁰ (Figs. 49 and 138). As the conveyor belt passes across the table, a plastic cover wraps each course to protect it from external impurities. When customers identify what they want to it, they can pick up the desired dish, move it in front of them, and finally uncover it.



Figure 137 – (Alaska Roll with tuna), Ginger.

One of the simplest versions of *maki* prepared at Ginger is a variation of Alaska roll with slices of salmon and avocado wrapping a layer of rice, in its turn enclosing a strip of *nori* and an internal heart composed of raw tuna and avocado (Fig. 137). The level of elaboration increases instead with the *makis* containing *tempura* shrimp, introducing an interesting innovation, already

¹⁴⁹ Neither rice bowls nor eggplants are served in any room, so that they will not be considered with respect to this particular case study.

¹⁵⁰ For more details, cf. §5.2.5.

observed in the case of Guu Izakaya: the *oku* of sushi hosts here raw radicchio¹⁵¹ (Fig. 138), which is representative of the local foodsphere—and, specifically, of the influences of the Italian *cuisine*. The importance of its presence goes beyond the material dimension, recalling the opposition smooth vs. crunchy: on this case the crispiness of tempura is partially reduced by the humidness conferred by the vegetable leaves, which make it softer.



Figure 138 – (Maki with *tempura* shrimp, radicchio and avocado), Ginger.



Figure 139 – (Fried *maki* with cooked shrimp and cheese), Ginger.

¹⁵¹ Also known as *Italian chicory*, radicchio is a leaf chicory usually having white-veined red leaves. It has a bitter and spicy taste. It is nowadays cultivated all across Europe.

By contrast, in order to keep and exalt crunchiness, the whole roll can be fried, as in Fig. 139, where an external deep fried coat wraps a layer of rice and a strip of *nori*, in turn enclosing a heart made of shrimp and cheese. The softness of the centre, enhanced by the presence of creamy cheese—which recalls the local foodsphere, where such ingredient plays a crucial role—, strongly contrasts with the crispiness of the outside, stressing the gradualness characterising the roll. Moreover, the dressings with which it is served add interesting aspects: common soy sauce is always available, together with wasabi and *gari*, in the small dish brought to the table at the beginning of the eating experience. The plate hosts instead a condensed soy sauce visually resembling to the balsamic vinegar that is generally used to decorate plates within the referential foodsphere. Mayonnaise is also provided, according to the local taste. However, both condiments are placed on a side, just partially touching the rolls, so that eaters are invited to taste them—they *have* to do it, at least for the portion that have been “contaminated” by the substances”—but can autonomously decide if they *want* to add more sauce or mayonnaise or not. Finally, the attention paid to visual geometries and composition should be remarked: rolls are arranged in different positions (cf. Figs. 137, 138, and 139), without any particular logic, but the attempt of creating harmonious (chromatic, topological, and eidetic) structures within the plate, which generally do not include any empty space among the different pieces and even between them and the dressings.

To conclude, it is particularly interesting to consider the caramelised salmon *nigiris* (Fig. 140): in this case, the condensed soy sauce is sprinkled all over the raw salmon slices surmounting the rice clumps, which are after caramelised by means of a small blowtorch.¹⁵²

¹⁵² Before customers’ eyes, as for most of the other practices of preparations (cf. §5.3.1.5).

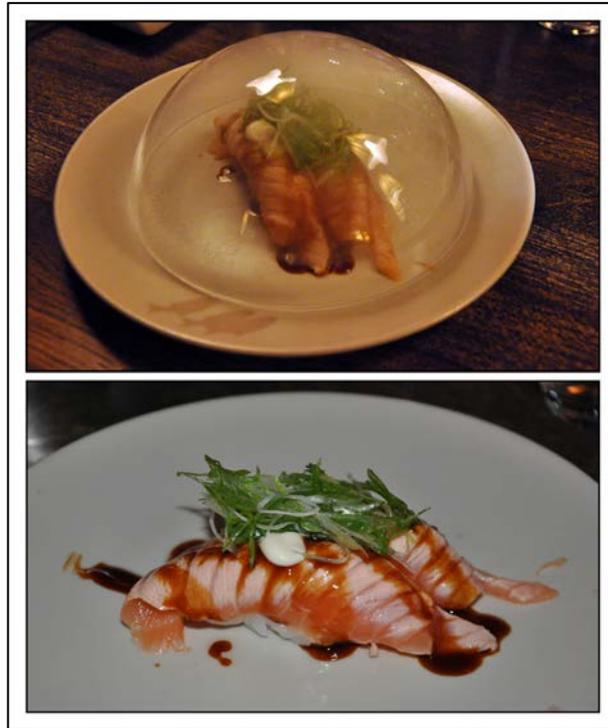


Figure 140 – (Caramelised salmon *nigiris*), Ginger.

Cooks then pour some more sauce on the caramelised fish slices, finally adding some small leaves of green salad, cut onions, and mayonnaise before covering the plate with the usual plastic cap. Precisely the latter reveals the action of the blowtorch, preventing the heat it released to escape from the dish and making it produce some vapour on the vault (Fig. 140, top). It is interesting to notice that, in this case, the nature of the sauce used makes caramelisation not confer crunchiness, but rather altering the appearance of the plate. The salmon slices *seem* cooked, but they *are* raw (illusion/lie), as revealed by their lower side (Fig. 140, on the left side of the bottom image).

5.3.3.6 Sansui

Sansui's care for details extends beyond the arrangement of the table, embracing the space of the plate. Here wooden platters (Fig. 141) and boats are commonly used for sushi assortments, while single courses or smaller combinations are generally served in white ceramic plates of different dimensions decorated with blue natural motifs (Figs. 142, 144). Lacquerware is adopted for *chirashi* (Fig. 146), and other particular plates can be used for special plates.¹⁵³



Figure 141 – “Assortiments de sushi (Matsu)” [Assorted Sushi], Sansui.

As regards the food-material, it should be remarked that, although assorted sushi includes in this case *guntanmaki*,¹⁵⁴ generally not so common in Japanese restaurants abroad, two particular elements point out the influence of the local foodsphere: the inclusion of cooked (grilled) fish and the use of chives to garnish one of the *nigiris*. On the other hand, wasabi returns here to become an invisible but integrant and inseparable component of sushi:

¹⁵³ As mentioned in the previous, different tableware characterises the Yakiniku room. Here the focus is on the rooms where sushi is served (i.e. the Sushi room and the Tatami room), where the same types of dishes are adopted.

¹⁵⁴ *Gunkanmaki* (軍艦巻, “warship roll”) is a particular type of *nigiri*, consisting in an oval, hand-formed clump of sushi rice with *nori* wrapping its perimeter to form a vessel, which is filled with fish roe, *nattō*, oysters, scallops, or other soft or fine-chopped ingredients.

wrapped between fish and rice, it establishes a regime of secrecy (not-seeming + being), revealing itself only to taste.¹⁵⁵

By contrast, sometimes it is not included in sushi, but rather placed on a side of the dish, together with ginger, allowing the eater to choose whether to eat it or not. This is the case of *Tempura maki* (Fig. 142) and all the *makis* presented in the section “Creative rolls” (*Rouleaux Création*) (e.g. Figs. 143 and 144).



Figure 142 – “Tempura Maki”, Sansui.



Figure 143 – “Skin Roll”, Sansui.

¹⁵⁵ Just in a very few cases, in fact, it can be barely seen in *makis*, where some green nuances are sometimes identifiable, but no traces of its presence are generally detectable. Moreover, the menu does not make any reference to its inclusion.



Figure 144 – “Tekka Maki” (top), Saumon Cheese Maki [Maki with Salmon and Cheese] (centre), and “California Maki aux Tobikko” [California Maki with Tobiko], Sansui.

Particularly, in the “Skin Roll” (Fig. 143), the heart of sushi hosts grilled (cooked) salmon and avocado, while wasabi becomes just one of the various separate condiments—together with ginger and soy sauce—that can be added by the same customer in a second moment. In addition to the passage from the raw to the cooked, “translation” finds expression in the form assumed by the rolls, which appear here more geometrical, almost assuming a squared configuration. Unlike the case of Wasabi, this suggests the idea of a general standardisation of sushi, which is further enhanced by the naming of plates, frequently adopting English forms although the menu is in French. Finally, it should be noticed that the most external layer of sesame seeds covers just one (precisely, the more visible to customers’ eyes) of the four sides of the maki, exactly as it happens in the case of tobiko (Fig. 144).

Another remarkable aspect concerning the space of the plate is that, in this case, separately ordered types of sushi are placed in the same dish if ordered by the same customer (Fig. 144). This makes it possible to perceive better what was stated about wasabi: it is already included in “traditional” *makis*, such as the *Tekka maki*, whose position allows the consumer to partially perceive it, although in a very few cases, where its green colour emerges between rice and tuna. By contrast, in both *Saumon Cheese Maki* (“Maki with Salmon and Cheese”) and *California Maki aux Tobikko* (“California

Maki with Tobiko”) it can be added by eaters, if wanted. These rolls are positioned differently, showing to customers the side where sesame or tobiko have been placed, while their interior is less accessible, metaphorically recalling the intention of surprising the eater. New ingredients, such as the cheese, are in fact introduced in such variants, evoking the translation processes somehow announced by the menu (which includes them in the section “*creative rolls*”, italics mine).



Figure 145 – “Cornet Spicy Tuna” (Spicy Tuna Cone), Sansui.

As regards *temaki*, Sansui offers only one variation of what the menu refers to as “cornets” (literally, “cones”, evoking the form of this type of sushi): the “Spicy Tuna Cone” (Fig. 145). Its name reveals one first evident element of “translation”, which consists in the spicy character of the plate. Moreover, the reference to the local sphere can be perceived also in the lettuce leaf substituting the more common avocado within the ingredients wrapped by *nori*. On the other hand, even in this case wasabi is already included inside sushi, recalling the traditional Japanese practices of consumption of *temakis*. Finally, an interesting feature concerns the presentation of the “cone”: unlike the previously analysed cases, *temaki* does not stand on the common wooden frame used to serve it, but lies on a black wooden dish, next to some ginger. This implies that, before eventually pouring some soy sauce on it or adding the *gari*, eaters should take it in their hands, carefully trying not to make the wrapped ingredients fall down. It

also requests cooks to reduce the quantity of food inside the cone, in order to prevent it to escape from it. On the other hand, as mentioned before, such choice facilitates also the traditional practices of consumption of temaki, which would require to close the protruding part of the seaweed on the wrapped internal ingredients before eating it.



Figure 146 – “Chirashi sushi”, Sansui (© Sansui).

Finally, we should consider *Chirashi sushi* (Fig. 146): as usually, sliced raw (salmon, seabass, tuna, and gilthead bream) and cooked (shrimp and octopus) fish, as well as some slices of fresh cucumber, are placed over a (partial) layer of seaweed and a layer of sushi rice, which are not visible as they are wrapped by the upper ingredient, on one side, and the lacquerware bowl, on the other side. As regards to the plate itself, the novelty is introduced by the external decoration of the bowl, which does not recall in this case the natural world, but includes some geometrical motifs. Some changes characterises also the level of food-material, with important effects of meaning: in addition to the previously mentioned ingredients, two other foods are included in the upper layer. *Tamagoyaki*, shaped in triangles recalling the golden decorations on the bowl, evokes the Japanese foodsphere. The same could be said for the plums next to it, which recall the importance of this ingredient in *washoku*. By contrast, on a closer

inspection, the fruits used at Sansui appear very different from the typical Japanese *umes*, generally more clear and rounded. The symbolical reference certainly remains meaningful, but the material difficulty in finding the proper foods makes “translation” manifest even when trying to stress the link with the “authentic” foodsphere to which the plate makes reference. “Translation”, moreover, becomes evident even at the level of practices, as people ordering *chirashi* are generally provided with a metal spoon, although not directly inserted in the plate.

5.3.3.7 Conclusion

The analysis points out an extreme variability with respect to the configuration of the micro-spatial level. Despite some attempts of recalling “tradition” and “authenticity”, the traces left by translation processes emerge at different levels, from the features of the tableware to the arrangement of foods within the plate, from the characteristics of food-material to the display of particular practices of preparation and the provision of specific practices of consumption of food.

Specifically, as regards to the material level, some plates seem particularly inclined to the processes of adaptation to the local foodspheres, in their turn causing interesting resemantisations. Let us consider, for example, the case of *chirashi* sushi, which, even in Japan, can include different ingredients depending on the chef’s or sometimes even customer’s choice. All the here-analysed examples consist in *gomokuzushi*, with mixed cooked and uncooked ingredients surmounting rice. The differences among them concern not only the nature of the foods contained in the dish—which come to include components typical of the local foodspheres—, but also the structural level—e.g. with nori becoming wrapping and visible instead of wrapped and concealed—and the deriving investments of meaning.

Moreover, the linguistic code plays an important role, remarking confusions or attempts of adaptation and translation. This becomes even more evident in the case of other types of sushi, which, although more formalised than *chirashizushi*, change in different ways. Particular linguistic forms are therefore used to stress the importance of rice rather than *nori*, “tradition” rather than “innovation”, standardisation rather than authenticity. New ingredients can be introduced, while some others can be eliminated or concealed. New configurations can affect the relation wrapping/wrapped, as well as the contrast raw/cooked, and the related semantic oppositions. Beyond the peculiarities of each case, which have been analysed in the previous, it is interesting to notice how the material dimension can never be conceived as separate from the symbolic and semantic level. Such relation, moreover, cannot be reduced to fixed and predetermined logics: considering wasabi, for example, we noticed how its disappearance from the plate can be related either to the attempt of evoking the Japanese habits, making it visibly disappear between the different layers of sushi (e.g. Wasabi and Sansui), or to the intention of not altering the “creative” flavour of the local “translations” of what is generally considered as the essence of *washoku* (e.g. Arcadia and Ginger).

With respect to the characterisation of the plate, we highlighted the importance of the visual configuration of the tableware, as well as its material structure, which generally recall the same tension between the search for “tradition” and the adaptation to the local taste or habits observed in the case of food. Furthermore, it is interesting to reflect upon the relation between full and empty spaces. As we mentioned before, the Japanese express the spatial concept in negative terms, referring to it as *ma* (間). Rather than focusing on its compositional elements, they stress the importance of the *intervals* between them, which are considered the basis of spatial progressive experience and designation. Such pure, and indeed essential void between components can be especially perceived in the

minimalism typical of architecture and garden design, as well as in music, *ikebana* (the art of arrangement of flowers), poetry, and arts. With respect to the eating experience and its translation processes, this concept seems to become more evident as we move from the macro-level of analysis—where the contrast between the typical Japanese minimalism and the local design is remarkable, especially with respect to the wrapping principle we identified as primary—, through the intermediate level of the table—where it helps establishing the borders between collective and individual sphere, evoking interesting effects of meaning—, to the micro-level of plates and food. Here two particular aspects are remarkable: despite a few exceptions, the general search for minimalism typical of the plates of *washoku*, where void spaces are frequent and valorised as—when not more than—the ones occupied by foods, seems to give way to the need of filling up the space of the dish or creating particular geometries or decorations, according to the local taste. Moreover, even within every piece of sushi, the various components are no more valorised according to their reciprocal positions and distances, but rather depending on the nature of their ingredients. Particular substances are substituted to others because of their taste, colour, or texture, and the wrapping principle often seems to be deprived of its fundamental logics. Therefore, if the Japanese arrangement of plates and its components exalts *discontinuity*, the here-analysed Western translations of *washoku* seem to break such configuration in different ways. While in the first case external rhythms, limits, and reiterations play a crucial role, in the second one a general tendency for surrendering to the flow, without paying attention to boundaries, and neutralising the external space can be identified. This is reflected even at the level of practices, not only with respect to sushi, but also as regards to other courses (e.g. eggplants): as in authentic Japanese plates all pieces are well distanced among each other, chopsticks can easily pick up them one by one without having to change the pre-set configuration of the dish. By contrast, the processes of translation generally imply the

need of breaking continuity by means of the same chopsticks—which, according to the Japanese etiquette should instead never be used to cut or pierce foodstuff—or the common western cutlery, used not only to lift foods, but also to cut and separate them. On the other hand, except in rare cases,¹⁵⁶ knives are absent, suggesting the idea of a partial segmentation that, instead of provoking a new sharp incision, disassembles foods according to their *cultural* (that is, previously established by cooks) interstices—exactly as Japanese chefs follow the *natural* interstices of substance. Moreover, unlike the common western dishes or their adaptations of sushi and other components of *washoku*, the Japanese plates commonly include small morsels that are not only easy to pick up but also to eat in their entirety. Combined with the peculiar praise of the empty spaces characterising their disposition, such aspect suggests the conception of each piece as a total unity, which is still characterised by discontinuity in its interior, but whose degustation presupposes the minimum degree possible of dismantling.

This immediately recalls the importance of the corporeal dimension: as mentioned in the previous, the body marks the boundary between subjectivity and the world. Such border, however, is continuously renegotiated, restored, and re-encoded, and therefore inclined to be crossed, denied, and confused (Marrone 2005b, 172). In this sense, it is particularly interesting to go back to Fischler's *principle of incorporation* (1988; 1990) and the works by Rozin (1976), Beardsworth (1990; 1995), and Bachelard (1948), distinguishing between two structures of the oral unconscious (*swallowing* and *mastication*) and their symbolic meanings. Specifically, as observed in Chapter 1, it should be remembered that the act of swallowing, not implying the disintegration of food, represents its valorisation and consecration, not altering its symbolic identity. On the contrary, with

¹⁵⁶ As Arcadia or Yakiniku, where, however, they are emptied of their function, as all food are generally served already cut in small pieces not requiring the intervention of the knife but, at most, the action of a spoon or fork.

mastication the desire for incorporation becomes sadistic, as the object incorporated is mutilated, damaged, and fragmented, decomposing and recomposing its symbolic meanings. Therefore, the “traditional” Japanese standards for the preparation of food and the organisation of the spatial level of the plate appear closer to swallowing, as the morsels, already separated and well distanced in the plate, are small and do not need to be excessively masticated. By contrast, the analysed examples of translation of the Japanese culinary code generally require both fragmentation within the plate, by means of specific tools, and mastication, because of the generally bigger dimensions of the different units. This stresses the indissoluble relation between material and symbolic dimension, which should not be overlooked or underestimated. We will discuss the details of such phenomena in the next paragraph, which will be devoted to a short review of the main aspects highlighted so far and the delineation of the main conclusions of the present analysis.

5.4 Concluding Remarks

After tracing a brief description of the case studies, also considering one of the most important systems of their visual identity (the logos of the restaurants), we proposed in the previous the analysis of their menus, considering the textual and the visual level, as well as the specific syntagmatic and paradigmatic structure characterising them. At a later stage, we focused on the spatial dimension, following a zoom movement that, from the macro-level of the restaurant and the dining room, through the intermediate stage of the arrangement and organisation of the table, brought us to consider the micro-level of plates and food. With respect to all these dimensions, we considered different elements, ranging from material aspects to visual configurations and proxemic patterns. Particularly, we examined space according to the tripartition among subjects enunciated in the space, enunciational subjects of the space, and social subjects actually interacting

with space, as well as with respect to some other crucial concepts such as embodied spaces, intimate/personal/social/public distance, techniques of the body, etc. We will provide in Chapter 6 more detailed epistemological reflections related to the different stages of the research. Here, we would like to point out some general remarks with respect to the main factors emerged from the analysis.

5.4.1 A “Structuralist Reading”: Continuity vs. Discontinuity

Building on Ferdinand de Saussure’s statement according to which meaning arises from *difference* (1916), recalled and enhanced by Lévi-Strauss (1964) and other scholars, the previously mentioned Japanese concept of *ma* could be interpreted in these terms: the spatial dimension means in first instance not by its *essence*, but according to its internal *differences*, or intervals. From this point of view, the same “wrapping principle” described by Henry could therefore be regarded as the establishment of borders that, creating *distances* between different layers, confer meaning to them and their crossing. At a (1) macro-level, therefore, the transformation of the Japanese eating experience into an *ethnic* experience could be seen as its transposition from a semiosphere where the configuration of restaurants—as that of other buildings—enhances *discontinuity*, generally looking for boundaries and delimitations producing meanings (“wrapping principle”), to a foreign semiosphere (generally referred to as the “Western” context in opposition to Japan) that seems instead to have increasingly valorised *continuity*, opting for open spaces, transparencies, and neutral entities promoting visual accessibility. In some cases, such transposition—or rather “translation”—seems to aim at adapting as much as possible the original structure and conception of space to the target semiosphere, making it familiar and easily understandable to the reader. A similar process would valorise *non-discontinuity*, trying to reveal in advance any border or barrier in order to escape or remove it. Let us remember, for example, the spatial configuration characterising Guu Izakaya, where transparent and very partial

barriers mark the presence of various areas and differently conceived eating experiences without establishing real separations between them, or Arcadia, where non-discontinuity puts into contact very diverse foodspheres and experiences, with just a few elements marking the boundaries between them. Under other circumstances, the “translation” seems instead to aim at staying as faithful as possible to the original spatial text,¹⁵⁷ valorising *non-continuity*. Caesuras and interruptions are in this case essential, as they create the conditions for surprising and unexpected events, (partially) concealing the processes of “translation”. This is partly noticeable in Shinobu, where movable screens and dividing elements separate the inside from the outside, as well as some internal partitions. And it becomes even more evident at Wasabi, Ginger, and Sansui, where the division of the eating space into different rooms, floors, or even buildings establishes different layers, creating the conditions for progressive discovery and acquisition of knowledge, although not in a regime of absolute discontinuity. (2) A similar configuration seems to characterise even the intermediate level of the table. From such a perspective, the Japanese conception of the eating experience would find expression in a sharp segmentation of the space, where intervals are essential in delimiting the private dimension within the collective space. Although the Japanese table setting has varied considerably over time,¹⁵⁸ traditionally, small individual box tables (*hakozen*, 箱膳) or flat floor trays were set before each diner (cf. Ashkenazi and Jacob 2000). Nowadays individual trays and/or placemats keep stressing the importance of *ma* in the configuration of the table, clearly delimiting the private space of each eater. Moreover, the same spatial arrangement of each tray or individual cover is strongly based on separations and intervals, with different small containers for various types of food. On the contrary, commensality generally characterises the Western table as a shared and collective space, where

¹⁵⁷ The term text should be here conceived in a broader sense, that is, with respect to all the three aspects mentioned by Marrone (2001) and used for the analysis, therefore including social actors and their practices of interpretation and resemantisation of spaces.

¹⁵⁸ Larger low tables (*chabudai*, ちゃぶ台) accommodating entire families have become increasingly popular since the 20th century, especially as a result of the process of Westernisation following the World War.

temporal subdivision partially substitutes *spatial* discontinuity, establishing particular syntagmatic chains.¹⁵⁹ Continuity therefore substitutes discontinuity, promoting sharing and conviviality, as the same etymology of the word commensality suggests. When the Japanese eating experience is brought to other foodspheres, two different situations usually seem to emerge. In the case of Guu Izakaya, Shinobu, Wasabi, and Ginger, for instance, non-discontinuity is enhanced through the adoption of a single tablecloth wrapping the entire table, or the absence of any particular covering material. While keeping this same configuration for the tables, Arcadia partially breaks this configuration in the space of the sushi bar, where individual placemats substitute the tablecloth. Sansui seems instead to explicitly opt for non-continuity, visibly marking the boundaries of the individual sphere not only at the counter, but also at the tables. Moreover, a series of particular objects—such as soy sauce dispensers, eating utensils, etc.—intervene in such dynamics in a significant way stressing the opposition private/collective. (3) Finally, even with respect to the micro-level of the plate, a similar configuration seems to be identified. While intervals are considered fundamental in Japan both with respect to the arrangement of foods within the plate and as regards to their internal structure—as we highlighted in the first chapters—, the Western dishes generally tend to stress the spaces occupied by food substances rather than the empty gaps between them, preferring continuity to discontinuity. With respect to the analysed “translations” of the Japanese plates, we pointed out in the previous how most of the cases (particularly, Guu Izakaya, Arcadia, and Shinobu, as regards to sushi; and all cases with respect to eggplants) seem to focus primarily on non-discontinuity, while just in a few examples (e.g. Sansui and Wasabi for sushi; no example for eggplants) non-continuity is sometimes observed. Building on these observations, we could therefore trace a semiotic square based on the contrast continuity/discontinuity, defining four basic typologies related to the conception and performance of the eating experience on

¹⁵⁹ It should be remembered, in fact, that the traditional organisation underlying the typical Japanese meal includes the compresence on the tray of different plates discerned depending on their ingredients, not on a particular order of consumption.

the basis of a particular configuration of the spatial dimension, articulated as discussed above (Fig. 147).

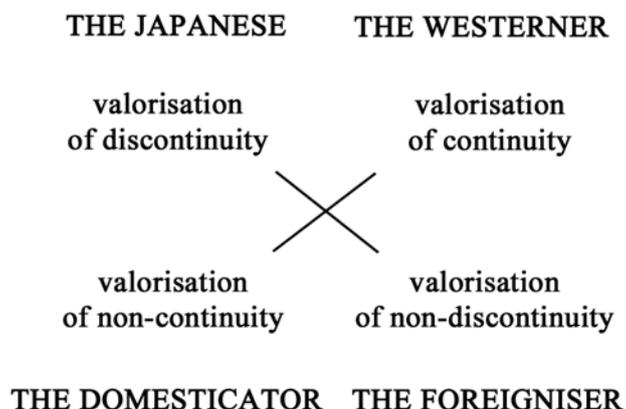


Figure 147 – Typologies of the performers of the Japanese eating experience.

From an *internal* perspective, focusing on the peculiarities of each foodsphere, the *Japanese* generally seems to stress discontinuity, whereas the *Westerner* usually valorises continuity. The contradictory terms come instead to represent the level of *translation*, that is, the transformation of local food into *ethnic* food. Here, two main attitudes emerge: on the one hand, the *domesticator*,¹⁶⁰ valorising non-continuity, recalls the attempt to adapt the source foodsphere to the target foodsphere, *bringing the author to the reader* (cf. Schleiermacher 1838). On the other hand, the *foreigniser*, stressing the need of *bringing the reader to the author* (*ibid.*), seems to favour non-discontinuity.

Such typologies represent theoretical constructs, allowing to distinguish two main levels: the contraries refer to the source or target foodsphere considered *per se*, which people generally—although erroneously, as we previously mentioned and we will discuss further in the following—refer to as “*tradition*”; by contrast,

¹⁶⁰ The here proposed denominations make reference to Schleiermacher’s distinction (1838) between *domestication* (also referred to as *free translation*) and *foreignisation* (also referred to as *faithful translation*). For further details on such issues, cf. Chapter 7.

their contradictories recall “*translation*” processes, that is, the transposition of elements between different foodspheres. From a similar perspective, also the menu (considered from the linguistic and visual point of view, but also with respect to the syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimension), as well as the usage of particular ingredients, and the practices (of preparation, but also of consumption) underlying the ethnic eating experience, could be read in these terms.

On the other hand, as mentioned before, a series of material reasons, cultural specificities, and other factors intervene in such dynamics, affecting not only the arrangement of the spatial structure, but different levels of the eating experience: the features of texts such as the menus, the definition of the visual identity of the restaurants, the usage of particular ingredients instead of or together with others, etc. A structuralist reading of these processes, therefore, proves to be again too simplistic and reductionist, as it interprets what is contingent as necessary, and what is related to peculiar circumstances as easily generalizable. It loses sight of the specificity of each foodsphere, adopting too generalist and ambiguous tags such as “Westerner” or “Japanese”, which do not seem able to describe the never static nor fixed nature of semiospheres—i.e. the so-called “traditions”.

Furthermore, the reduction of the “wrapping principle”—which, as mentioned different times in the previous, is central to the Japanese semiosphere¹⁶¹—to very abstract and generalist categories such as continuity/discontinuity seems to be extremely simplistic and reductionist. The binary character of the structuralist approach appears hardly applicable to the cultural specificity of such principle, which reflects very different aesthetics and logics from those where structuralism arose. Particularly, some fundamental ideals of Japanese aesthetics¹⁶² seem

¹⁶¹ To the extent that it proved to be essential for the description of the specificity of *washoku*, with respect to different levels that the common structuralist model did not turn out to adequately resolve.

¹⁶² The philosophical discipline in Japan corresponding to Western “aesthetics” arose only in the nineteenth century, but the most important aesthetic ideas date back to different periods and source, before it was formally established as a discipline (cf. Parkes 2011). It would be impossible to offer here a comprehensive review of such a complex set of concepts, which include ideals such as *mono no aware* (“the pathos of things”), *wabi* (“subdued, austere beauty”), *sabi* (“rustic patina”), *yūgen* (“mysterious profundity”), *iki* (“refined style”), and *kire* (“cutting”), etc. We will deal in the following

essential to understand *tsutsumi*. *Yūgen* (幽玄), generally translated as “profound grace” or “mysterious profundity”,¹⁶³ recalls the depth of the world we live in, as experienced through cultivated imagination.¹⁶⁴ *Mono no ware* (物の哀れ)—composed of the words *mono*, “thing”, and *ware*, expressing measured surprise (similar to “ah” or “oh”)—could be roughly translated as “the pathos of things”, as “an empathy toward things”, or rather “a sensitivity to ephemera”, therefore referring to the awareness of impermanence or transience of things, in the form of both a temporary gentle sadness or wistfulness at their passing and a longer, deeper gentle sadness about this state being the reality of life (cf. Lee 1995, 142). Finally, *makoto* (まこと), literally meaning “true words”, refers to truthfulness in general, recalling the intention of capturing the essence of things, especially through the immediacy of senses (cf. Takiguchi 2014). Such principles, together with many other remarkable ideals forming part of Japanese aesthetics, well depict the impossibility to reduce *tsutsumi* to a binary system, stressing its permanent fluctuation among the utopia of an immediate sensory perception, a sort of melancholia or wistfulness for the disappearing of things, and the necessity of protecting the completeness of meaning by concealing it, that is, *wrapping* it. Evidently, there would be much more to say about *tsutsumi* and, more generally, with respect to Japanese aesthetics and thought, considering all the facets that could help improving the understanding of a such complex concept as the “wrapping principle”. Nonetheless, the in-depth analysis of similar issues would lie outside the purposes of the present research. The very concise—and therefore limited—description presented above is intended to show the impossibility of

with the points matching the purposes of the present paragraph, that is, providing the reader with some ideals which seem essential to understand the specificity of the “wrapping principle” without reducing it to simplistic and external logics. For more details on Japanese aesthetics, cf. in particular Hume 1995; Marra M. 1999; DeBary *et al.* 2001 and 2005; Marra M.F. 2002 and 2011; Saito 2007; Parkes 2011.

¹⁶³ Even though its translation depends on the context. In the Chinese philosophical texts the term was taken from, it meant “dim”, “deep”, or “mysterious”. In the criticism of Japanese *waka* poetry, it describes the subtle profundity of things that are only vaguely suggested by the poems, recalling what stands beyond what can be said, although not alluding to another world or experience.

¹⁶⁴ For more details on the definition and history of *yūgen*, cf. Tsubaki 1971.

reducing it to dualistic and too simplistic logics. Together with the other factors mentioned in the previous, it represents one of the main reasons why a structuralist approach, already emerged as partial and simplistic when dealing with the observations related to each section, still seems to be inadequate and unable to describe the specificity of the considered processes and examples, requiring to adopt a different perspective.

5.4.2 Adopting a Different Perspective: the Ethnic Eating Experience and Translation Processes

While introducing an attempt of distinction of the processes of translation, opposing domestication to foreignisation, the “structuralist reading” of the research has turned out to be too rigid, simplistic, and generalist to describe the results of the analysis. A more dynamic and flexible description could be provided referring to Landowski’s model for the relation between subjects and otherness (2005), with particular reference to the *regime of adjustment*. The interaction between the actants—be they *topoi*, people, or objects—cannot be described in terms of a unilateral acquisition of the object of value by the subject, according to the common narrative grammar of *manipulation*. By contrast, meaning is shared and generated by the same relation between the actants. The interaction does not rely on already given values and meanings, but rather stresses the production of new values and meanings intended as the conditional actualisation of previously mere potentialities. Here is where the importance of the interpretative model emerges: despite any attempt of establishing a Model User through particular spatial or textual strategies aiming at guiding his decoding, resemantisation is potentially intrinsic of any practice of interpretation by the Empirical User. This, in turn, contributes to stress the importance of the indissoluble link between the spatial and the corporeal dimension: the body emerges as the place for the production of meaning, that is, as an entity hanging in the balance between Nature

and Culture, physiological processes and social dynamics, sensory perception and intersubjectively shared codes and practices. Such *in-betweenness*, moreover, makes the body not ascribable to any of such categories, requiring to adopt a perspective able to go beyond purely dualistic logics and the conception of texts as fixed and immutable entities with pre-established values and meanings.

Given these observations, at a general level, two main tendencies seem to emerge from the analysed cases, just partially recalling the results of the “structuralist reading”, although from a more open perspective. Some cases emphasise the processes of “translation”, enhancing activities of desemantisation and resemantisation of the ethnic eating experience and reassuring eaters about their competence and possibilities to perform it. Proposed as a parenthetical reality with well-defined temporal and spatial boundaries, which are always interconnected with the local reality thanks to more or less explicitly displayed traces of the processes of translations, such experiences seem to aim at reassuring subjects and stress such indeterminateness and “adjustment” of meaning. On the other hand, some other cases seem more inclined to try to keep as faithful as possible to the source foodsphere, trying to temporarily conceal the translation processes and the local sphere as much as possible in order to create a total and completely absorbing experience, therefore enhancing what could be defined as an effect of *suspension of disbelief*.¹⁶⁵ the frame of the ethnic experience remains “suspended” and who participates in it tends to perceive it as real and “authentic”.

Nonetheless, “translation” is in any case unavoidable: the linguistic code, the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes, as well as the food-material, the articulation of the spatial dimension, and the promotion of particular practices and *techniques of the body* should at least partially adapt to the local foodspheres, making readers able to decode and therefore live the ethnic experience. Moreover, as mentioned in the previous, different reasons of economic, cultural, or different nature intervene

¹⁶⁵ Coined in 1817 by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the expression *suspension of disbelief* was first used to refer to the fact that, when a semblance of truth is infused into a fantastic tale, the reader suspends judgment concerning the implausibility of the narrative. Different scholars have then recalled such theory with respect to mass and new media.

in such dynamics, affecting different levels of the eating experience independently from the explicit will of the involved subjects.

What is important to remark here is that, whether they are explicitly displayed to “reassure” the consumer or rather concealed to create an effect of suspension of disbelief, the processes of “translation” are a constant component of any attempt at (more or less metaphorically) “eating the Other”. Such unavoidable component refers not only to those in charge of preparing the ethnic experience, but also, and especially, to those who “consume” it. In other words, as the theories of linguistic translation would suggest, both the authors (or, in this case, the providers) and the readers (the users) of the eating experience are essential for its transposition between different foodspheres. As we pointed out for any analysed aspect, the translated text identifies a Model Reader/User, mainly according to the logics described in the previous. On the other hand, Empirical Readers/Users can distance from the textual strategies and intentions, intervening on its same configuration. If in some cases, with particular reference to “foreignising” processes, this could imply the partial failure of the same experience, or a bad sanction by the Sender/Provider, in most circumstances such “adjustments” open the way to more or less gradual changes that, recurring over time, formalise new textualities and make them become essential components of the ethnic experience. At each level of analysis, every trace of “translation” can be therefore conceived as both the cause and the effect of unceasing processes of re-writing of the eating experience that appear intrinsic to the same processes of “translation”.

Food habits and codes, like other elements of the semiosphere, actually constitute a peculiarity of culture and the evident manifestation of the fractures existing among different ethnic groups (cf. Leroi-Gourhan 1964–1965). In this sense, the *ethnic style* can be conceived as the way by which a community assumes and marks specific forms, values, and rhythms:

Everyday forms are subject to a slow process of unconscious adaptation, as though common objects and gestures were being gradually molded to the changing

attitudes of a collective whose membership is homogeneous. Exceptional forms, on the other hand, undergo real mutation in groups where individual invention is not hampered by an excessively rigid tradition. [...] In day-to-day practices and their setting, the marks of style are deep because they lie outside the scope of conscious awareness (*ibid.*, [ET 1993, 277]).

The preferences acquired through ethnic education have the same nature of any other human system of traditions. They are collected in a code whose general articles lay the foundations for the taste of the whole community. The interpretation of such code gives rise to more or less evident variations, whose traces are formalised over time, in a process that could be defined in terms of an unlimited *re-semiosis* or *resemantisation*. As we will discuss more in depth in the last chapter,¹⁶⁶ the processes of “translation” are always present, either they are exalted or concealed; either when “explosive” or very “gradual” and therefore not immediately perceptible; either across different cultural systems or within a same semiosphere.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Chapter 7.

SECTION 4

CONCLUDING REMARKS

CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSIONS

Abstract

Building on the results of the desk and field analyses, Chapter 6 proposes some epistemological remarks related to the role of semiotics within the field of food studies. Particularly, recalling what stated in the first chapters, we meditate here on the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches, pointing out if, how, and to what extent they have proved to be useful for the different stages of the present analysis. Secondly, we introduce the main outcomes of the research, leading the focus of attention to translation processes and cultural dynamics. Finally, the still open questions resulting from the here proposed research are presented, tracing the path for future developments in food-related semiotic studies.

6.1 Which Semiotics of Food?

We considered in Chapter 1 the main scholarly works dealing with food. After presenting the important contributions by renowned *structuralists* such as Lévi-Strauss, Douglas, Barthes, and Bourdieu, we highlighted the principal weaknesses of their approach, particularly referring to the criticisms moved by the so-called *developmentalists* (especially Goody, Mennell, and Mintz). If the great virtue of structuralism is that it recognises the culturally shaped and socially controlled character of taste and food, it seems instead to be too rigid and unable to catch social changes. Particularly, recalling Norbert Elias (1939a; 1939b; 1969), we made reference to the concept of “process-reduction”, that is, the tendency in Western thought to look for static and constant formulae, codes, or deep structures underlying the flux and change of the social sphere. Moreover, according to Mennell, Murcott, and van Otterloo (1992), another weakness of the structuralist approach is that, while avoiding any suspicion of ethnocentrism, it exceeds the limits of cultural relativism, eliminating any possibility of explaining different habits and their origins in terms of purpose, function, or utility. This is further aggravated by the lack of a proper diachronic analysis, as lamented in the end of Chapter 1.

More recent investigations have enlarged the field of analysis, embracing different dimensions—from taste and senses to arts and literature, from mass media and cinema to commensality and its roles—and focusing on sociocultural differences and changes. Such analysis are very interesting, not only for their content, but also as regards to the methodological level. New *texts*, *discourses*, and *practices* related to food have been taken into consideration, stressing the important role of more recent branches of semiotics. For instance, we highlighted how the analysis of food-related behaviours and habits recalls various relevant issues in *sociosemiotics*, such as the tensions underlying the creation of meaning in social practices and the development of patterns of signification across time, space, and different social and cultural circumstances (cf. Landowski 1989; Marrone 2001; Copley and Randviir 2009). From the point of view of *semiotics of culture*, moreover, it seems essential and urgent to focus on the relation

between culinary “traditions” and “innovations”, on the one hand, and cultural identities, on the other hand, paying particular attention to the hybridisation and exchange processes increasingly characterising contemporary foodspheres. As studying culinary systems means dealing with eating and ingesting food mostly composed of plants and animals, we also pointed out the role of *biosemiotics*, which could help casting new light on the interaction among the physiological dimension of nutrition, the cultural aspects of signification and communication, and the social structures of production, distribution, and consumption. Finally, we pointed out the need for considering issues until now mainly neglected, such as the role of spatial dimension and corporeality, which are essential for the understanding of contemporary phenomena such as food globalisation and the circulation of foods and food habits across different foodspheres.

If on the side of contents an enlargement is needed, on the side of methodology we highlighted the necessity of complementing the more traditional approaches, such as structuralism and text semiotics, to *new perspectives* focusing on the observation of *practices*, *social dynamics*, and other tools of analysis. Moreover, we pointed out the importance of *interdisciplinarity*, suggesting the urgency of connecting semiotics with the other branches of learning (such as anthropology, sociology, history and geography of food, etc.) that have traditionally dealt with food, whose contribution is essential not only in terms of content, but also with respect to methodology. Consequently, Chapter 2 was devoted to a brief but accurate examination of some recently born semiotic approaches embracing the analysis of sociocultural phenomena and new methodological tools (with particular reference to sociosemiotics and ethnosemiotics). The core concept of such a reflection was the idea of *textuality*: we reported how the structuralist conception of text as an immutable, coherent, and orderly system has been progressively enlarged and partially overcome, adopting a wider perspective correlating texts to the discursive rules on which they depend—and, at the same time, which they contribute to renovate. The division between text and context has become increasingly confused, as the same context has come to represent an interpretable text. In this way the object of analysis has come to coincide with the same social acts that transform intersubjective relationships, leading semiotics to focus on *practices*, that is, “*ways of doing things that*

arrange and rearrange the meanings that are deposited in texts, enhancing specific *readings*” (Volli 2000, 225 [translation mine]). On the methodological side, therefore, when semiotics extends to the domain of social action and dynamics—taking the shape of sociosemiotics or, as other scholars support, of ethnosemiotics—, it is pushed towards fields of application typical of other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, ethnology, and ethnography. This requires elaborating and implementing *new parameters and models of analysis*, which are still matter of fervent debate within the semiotic arena.

In the next paragraph we will meditate on how and to what extent different approaches have proved to be useful for the different stages of the present analysis, finally trying to answer to a crucial question which was introduced in the opening of the work (Chapter 1): which are or should be the main features of a comprehensive “semiotics of food”?

6.2 An “Epistemological Reading” of the Research

Both for the desk and the field analysis, we made reference to different tools, ranging from semiotics to other disciplines. Our aim was to analyse ethnic food with respect to specific parameters and aspects established in the first chapters, which have brought us to organise the analytical section in different partitions. Initially, an accurate research based on the existing anthropological, historical, geographical, and sociological literature proved to be essential for acquiring a sufficiently developed encyclopaedia with respect to the considered foodspheres. Particularly, this kind of resource played a crucial role in the case where no extended direct observation was possible, that is, as regards to the Japanese case. In a second moment, such information was analysed through a semiotic approach, recalling different methodologies and proposing new tools of analysis. Finally, the fieldwork added on interesting information and helped generating new perspectives of analysis, moving the focus of attention to “translation” processes.

The attempt of deciphering the “grammar” underlying the “traditional” Japanese

meal, for instance, consisted in a first phase of description of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes according to specific bibliographical resources (Chapter 4), which was followed by a second phase consisting in the examination of the menus of the restaurants selected for the field analysis (Chapter 5), through a contrastive perspective. In that case we made reference essentially to the traditional tools offered by structuralism and text semiotics, which allowed us not only to analyse the linguistic dynamics related to the transposition of the menu between different semiospheres, but also to individuate the essential grammar units characterising each text (syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions). Thanks to visual semiotics, moreover, we could identify specific chromatic, eidetic, and topological configurations, which proved to play a fundamental role in the processes of translation of the menu, as they can be used (1) to provide more information about the courses or their preparation/consumption, (2) to recall elements typical of *washoku* and, more generally, of the Japanese semiosphere, or rather (3) to symbolise the versatile and open character of the offered ethnic eating experience. In order to fully understand the dynamics underlying such processes, however, we had to make reference to the interpretative approach, recalling concepts such as Empirical Author/Reader, Model Author/Reader, and encyclopaedia (cf. §5.2.7).

At a different level, *tsutsumi* (or “wrapping”) proved to be one of the most important concepts to refer to: firstly presented according to the existing literature, making reference to different fields, it turned out to represent an essential tool for the analysis of the different levels of the spatial dimension related to *washoku*. From the configuration of sushi to the arrangement of the dining space, it emerged not only as a formal structure characterising some elements of the Japanese food experience, but as a real *structuring logic* describing a particular aesthetics and cultural system. When analysing the dining environment, for example, we referred principally to the narrative theorisations and the Greimasian distinction between topical (heterotopical and utopian) and paratopical space. Moreover, we focused on the visual configuration of the eating space, recalling descriptions by different authors (including native and local voices, but also external views, such as Barthes’ *L’Empire des Signes*). This allowed us to individuate some basic oppositions such as light *vs.* darkness, sheen *vs.* opaqueness, transparency *vs.*

obstruction, etc., which made it possible to describe the essential role played by sight in *washoku* in terms of a fundamental semantic opposition: to show *vs.* to conceal. On the other hand, no comprehensive understanding of the spatial dimension of *washoku* seemed possible without reading it through the “wrapping principle”, which proved to be essential also for the comparison between the Japanese and the Western conception of the eating space and the practices taking place within it—while, at the same time, reshaping it (cf. §5.3.1.7). The focus on *tsutsumi*, moreover, let the importance of the corporeal dimension emerge, putting emphasis on the process of parallel unwrapping of the space and the body related to the Japanese eating experience and its analysed variations. The centrality of corporeality became even more evident as we moved from the macro- to the intermediate and, finally, micro-level of analysis: beyond the processes of wrapping and unwrapping of the body, we highlighted the importance of considering embodied spaces, proxemic patterns, and the particular dynamics related to incorporation, as well as the so-called “techniques of the body”.

As regards to food, according to the parameters established for the analysis (Chapter 3), we devoted the last part of Chapter 4 to the examination of the main historical, geographical, and symbolic features of *rice*, which represents the staple of Japanese cuisine, and *sushi*, which is considered one of the most representative elements of *washoku* (not only in Japan, but also and above all abroad, where it becomes an *ethnic* food). Again, we adopted a multi-level approach: at first, we made reference to specific recipe books, historical and cooking treatises, anthropological analyses, sociological essays, and other bibliographical resources in order to define the main features of their preparation, consumption, and value investments. In a second moment, a similar approach was used also for the main western variations of sushi. Finally, we proposed a semiotic analysis of sushi, which, building on the material dimension, went beyond it, trying to individuate specific oppositions (such as internal/external, enclosed/enclosing, raw/cooked, humid/dry, etc.) and relate them to the semantic level. However, such analysis proved not to be able to adequately describe and explain the specificity of the configuration of sushi and the effects of meaning associated with it. By contrast, as mentioned before, the wrapping principle turned out to be a more thorough and adequate

tool for the analysis of its different typologies and effects of meaning. As pointed out in Chapter 4, the semantic sphere concerning sushi and its “translations” does not seem to rely on the individuation of dualistic oppositions, but rather on the way such contrasts are structured, reshaped, and resemantised within the Japanese context or in their transpositions to different foodspheres. We could therefore identify a particular *gradualness* distinguishing Japanese sushi, which came out to disappear or being almost completely reshaped in its western variations (Chapters 4 and 5)—although the same opposed terms characterised them. Similarly, when briefly dealing with *umami*, the “pleasant savoury taste” particularly valorised in Japanese cuisine, we noticed that a structuralist description would have hardly accomplished a complete and comprehensive analysis, while the post-Greimasian *tensive* model (cf. Fontanille 2003, 69–73 and 109–116; Fontanille and Zilberberg 1999), based on the two “valencies” of intensity and extent, seemed more appropriate to examine sushi with respect to the taste dimension and the idea of “balance” underlying it. Again, moreover, a particular wrapping structure proved to be influential in the location of particular ingredients within the different layers composing sushi, with significant changes in the case of its western variations.¹

As regards to the specificity of the field analysis (Chapter 5), in addition to the previously mentioned aspects, it should be noticed that its same inclusion implies a particular conception of the object of semiotic studies. Embracing the premises and methodologies of sociosemiotics and ethnosemiotics, we pointed out the need of going beyond the textual dimension, as it was conceived by structuralism, rather focusing on the ethnic *experience* intended as a *meta-textuality* comprising different textualities. Recalling the so-called “turning point of semiotics” (cf. Fabbri 1998), we adopted a conception of textuality exceeding the limits of the structuralist notion of text, which was reconsidered in a wider framework including the discursive rules on which it depends—and, at the same time, which it contributes to renovate. The aim of the research was precisely to analyse the “translations” of the culinary code in a far more extensive field of analysis than the consideration of texts such as menus or recipes,

¹ Nevertheless, it should be remembered that such issue was just briefly mentioned, as the purpose of the analysis was to focus on other topics. This point, therefore, would need to be further explored through an accurate analysis of the gustatory dimension related to *washoku* and its “translations”.

therefore including the same social acts that transform intersubjective relationships and arrange and rearrange the meanings deposited in given texts, enhancing or discouraging specific readings (cf. Volli 2000, 225). For this reason, we decided to take into consideration and directly observe six particular case studies, focusing mainly on the spatial dimension and corporeality, which represent essential but still almost neglected topics in the considered field of research. This brought us to embrace different fields, from proxemics to Mauss' concept of "techniques of the body", from sociology to cultural patterns, and so on. Particularly, the focus on space led us to adopt the classification proposed by the sociosemiotician Gianfranco Marrone (2001) with respect to three forms of subjectivity related to space. After examining the subjects enunciated by the space (specific *topoi* covering actantial roles and modal configurations, interacting with other human or spatial actants) and the enunciational subjects of the space (the Model Users presupposed by spatiality), the fieldwork allowed us to verify the congruence or incongruence of Empirical Users' *practices* with respect to such levels. Following in Lévi-Strauss' (1949) and Marrone's (2001) footsteps, we conceived the spatial system as the level of expression, while the narrative programs taking place within it were referred to the level of content. Such a perspective proved to be very useful as it allowed us to consider both the textual dimension and practices in a systematic way, keeping the previously described "zoom" movement chosen for the development of the analysis of the spatial dimension and stressing the importance of adopting an interpretative perspective, able to point out the discrepancies between Model Users and Empirical Users, as well as the role of resemantisation processes. We highlighted how specific forms of textuality (such as a particular configuration of the seating or the inclusion of certain utensils or other elements on the table) could be understood only according to pre-existent practices that, recurring over time, had resemantised the eating experience, depositing new forms of textuality. On the other hand, as mentioned different times throughout the work, it is essential to remember that a series of material reasons, cultural specificities, and other factors not directly related to the explicit will or intentions of the providers (or consumers) of the eating experience intervene in such dynamics, affecting it at different levels. This highlights the need of

avoiding extreme generalisations or interpreting what is contingent as necessary and what is related to peculiar circumstances as easily generalizable.

As regards to the *definition of the corpus*, we mentioned in Chapter 3 all the parameters according to which it was established. Here, it is worthwhile to remark that, according to a sociosemiotic and ethnosemiotic perspective, even at the level of practices, we abstracted from the peculiarities of social subjects, conceiving them as the simple performers of specific programmes of action (cf. Floch 1990, 25). We also abstracted from the reasons and purposes of their eating experiences, although, as mentioned when describing the criteria established for the selection of the cases studies, we decided to focus exclusively (1) on the dinner, precisely because it is more likely to be conceived as a moment of enjoyment and relax, and specifically (2) on those cases where the quality and costs of the service made it more plausible that the choice of the restaurant by the consumers was not due to economical or practical reasons, but rather to a real interest or curiosity toward a particular kind of ethnic food or eating experience. Moreover, we considered another aspect of pertinence as essential: aiming at analysing the processes of translation of the culinary code, we decided to adopt a *contrastive* approach based not only (1) on the comparison between restaurants trying to conceal the “translation” processes, on the one hand, and restaurants showing them off, on the other hand, but also (2) on the identification of three foodspheres with different conceptions of the local food “tradition” and different food habits.

Going beyond the methodological dimension, it is essential to highlight the crucial role played by the fieldwork in the *definition* of the same *object* of analysis: as mentioned in Chapter 4, we decided to deal mainly with rice because of its importance within the Japanese foodsphere, further restricting the focus of attention to sushi, as it is generally considered the most representative element of *washoku*, particularly when it becomes an ethnic (that is, “translated”) food. By contrast, the field analysis showed the need of considering another fundamental element that, although not being central to *washoku*, emerged as a remarkable case of “translation” mainly because of its practices of consumption: eggplants. This stresses the importance of the same practice of observation, recalling the processes of distinction between textual and contextual

elements proposed in Chapter 2.

Finally, it is essential to reconsider the processes that brought us to draw the general conclusions related to the field analysis (§5.4): again, the structuralist approach, which had previously proved to be useful—although partially—for the analysis of some factors (such as the configuration of the menus or some aspects of the spatial dimension), turned out to be reductionist and unable to explain the specificity of the considered variations. While introducing an attempt of distinction of the processes of “translation”, opposing *domestication* to *foreignisation*, the “structuralist reading” of the research proved to be too rigid, simplistic, and generalist to describe the results of the analysis. Moreover, the classic structuralist binary system turned out to be itself related to a specific cultural framework that did not fit with the particular aesthetics characterising the referential foodsphere and its basic logics, rather based on a multi-level configuration and different ideals. A more dynamic and flexible description arose from the consideration of Landowski’s model (2005) and, particularly, his description of the *regime of adjustment*, which proved to be more adequate to describe the dynamic and creative character of the ethnic eating experience, although from a very general point of view. As any interaction with the Other, such experience does not rely on already given values and meanings, but rather stresses the production of new values and meanings intended as the conditional actualisation of previously potentialities. This drew the attention to the importance of adopting an interpretative model, as already suggested when dealing with the different levels of analysis.

A sort of “wrapping principle”, therefore, seems to be applicable to the research itself: when “translation” processes and different semiospheres are considered, it is necessary to proceed through the different layers of their examination according to a specific gradualness, never losing sight of the other levels of analysis and, above all, of the cultural specificity of the observed objects, therefore avoiding any sort of pretended universalism. Yet Mary Douglas reproached Lévi-Strauss for erroneously expecting to find universal meanings common to all mankind through the analysis of very restricted societies, while Roland Barthes stressed the importance of adopting a transformational perspective, whose importance was further stressed—as mentioned in the previous—by

the developmentalists and other scholars. Moreover, it is important to remark the urgency of considering the *temporal* dimension: as lamented by many scholars, structuralism, looking for static and constant formulae and codes, runs the risk of losing sight of the flux and changes of the social sphere, which play instead a crucial role in the here analysed processes. As mentioned before, some forms of textuality can be understood only according to pre-existent practices that, recurring over time, resemantise the eating experience, depositing new textualities, in a process of continuous *re-semiosis*. This implies the need of avoiding a synchronic analysis in favour of a diachronic perspective able to catch the processes of stratification of texts and their meanings.

Recalling the question closing Chapter 1, therefore, what does the present analysis tell us about the main features of a comprehensive “semiotics of food”? As the above brief review shows, different approaches and disciplines have proved to be essential for the development of the analysis. On the other hand, different contrasts have emerged, emphasising the limits of some approaches or fields of research. Particularly, we highlighted different aspects under which structuralism proved to be too simplistic and universalistic, therefore not seeming able to describe the complexity and specificity of the analysed phenomena. By contrast, it should not be forgotten that under other aspects it turned out to be an effective tool of analysis, together with more enlarged views and new analytical methodologies and perspectives. The key word for the foundation of a befitting “semiotics of food”, therefore, seems to be *transversality*: in order to be able to effectively analyse the multiple signs, discourses, and practices related to food, we should be able to combine not only different methodologies and theoretical perspectives, but also various disciplines, rejecting any *a priori* closure toward certain approaches or points of view. This means to recognise, following in structuralism’s footsteps, the importance of cultural and social determination of food habits and taboos, but at the same time to adopt a diachronic point of view able to catch sociocultural changes over time. It means to try to decipher the grammars underlying food processes and discourses, being at the same time able to go beyond a purely dualistic model by taking into account and describing the *continuum* between the poles in opposition. It means to consider all

the textualities dealing with food—analysing, narrating, interpreting, mediating, and re-mediating it—, including not only the traditionally intended texts, but also the practices related to its preparation, consumption, and distribution, paying particular attention to the hybridisation processes that have changed the societies we live in.

As the structure of the present research proves, echoing the configuration of many scholarly books on food-related issues, we should stop thinking about these elements and perspectives as *aut aut* alternatives,² starting to consider them as *vel vel* options.³ Perhaps more than other semioticians, therefore, the “semiotician of food” is called to act not as an *engineer*, who adopts fixed instruments and follows a system of rules leading him to somehow already set solutions, but rather as a *bricoleur* (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1962; Floch 1990), who invents new contingent solutions by reusing and readjusting the various tools at his disposal.

6.3 Building the Path for New Prospects and Developments: Main Outcomes of the Research and Still Open Questions

The present research represents an attempt of concretising what stated in the closing of last paragraph: building on different perspectives and tools of analysis, we have tried to act ourselves as *bricoleurs* in order to explore specific topics so far mainly neglected by semiotics. We have recalled different approaches,⁴ applying them to the particular case of *washoku* and its “translations”, with the double aim of (1) improving our understanding of the considered aspects and (2) using the same research as a sort of testing ground for particular semiotic tools and perspectives. In the previous paragraph we tried to trace the main epistemological remarks resulting from the research, responding to the second purpose. Here we would like to address the first point, proposing some brief reflections on the main outcomes and still open questions ensuing from the present study.

² That is, reciprocally excluding terms.

³ That is, not necessarily contrasting terms.

⁴ Mainly in semiotics but not only.

6.3.1 Main Outcomes of the Research

The choice of focusing on the *spatial dimension* proved to be very effective, leading us to consider also *corporeality* and embrace different issues, from commensality to the distances related to the eating experience, from incorporation to the material and symbolic features of plates and food, from the parallel processes of unwrapping and wrapping of body and space to the importance of sight in the analysed phenomena. Particularly, we stressed the importance of taking into consideration not only the material or physical dimension of the eating experience, but also and especially the symbolic space characterising it, which is fundamental in the definition of the roles and forms of “being at the table”, as well as in the introduction and enhancement of particular practices of sharing, exchange, and recognition of—one’s own and others’—identity. From the configuration of the dining room(s) to the arrangement of plates and the structure of foods, passing through the setting and characterisation of the table, the spatial dimension activates and enhances specific processes of semiosis and re-semiosis. Both a *horizontal* axis—linked to the dynamics of aggregation and cohesion, or rather isolation, related to commensality, as well as to specific characterisations of the public and the private sphere of each diner—and a *vertical* axis—based on the definition of hierarchies and specific roles, but also on aesthetic values (cf. Ariès 2000)—intervene in such processes, creating particular effects of meaning. The space of the eating experience, moreover, does not simply coincide with the objects and places of the meal. By contrast, it recalls what Boutaud (2005) describes as an *enlarged communicative space*, including eaters’ both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication, as well as the spatiotemporal development of the eating experience. This further stresses the role played by corporeality, requiring to analyse the spatial dimension according to a model able to grasp the interactions between space and social subjects (cf. Marrone 2001). In the particular case of the present analysis, such approach brought us to focus particularly on sight—whose role in the Japanese cuisine had been previously described recalling

Roland Barthes (1970) and other scholars' works—, as well as on the particular dynamics related to the so-called “wrapping principle”.

We also dealt with the *visual identity* of each case study, as well as with the *menus*, pointing out the main levels characterising the *carte* of the restaurant as one of the most evident clues of the processes of “translation” related to the food universe. Before the field analysis, moreover, we took into consideration the main features of *washoku*, with respect to *food substances* and *values*, as well as to visual and spatial configurations and syntagmatic and paradigmatic structures.

The fieldwork therefore concretised the intention of focusing on the processes of “translation” related to the culinary code, pointing out remarkable dynamics underlying the transposition of the eating experience across different foodspheres. Beyond the peculiarities of each example, we highlighted two main tendencies at a more general level: some cases seem to emphasise the processes of “translation”, enhancing activities of desemantisation and resemantisation of the eating experience and reassuring eaters about their competence and possibilities to perform it; other cases are instead more inclined to try to keep as faithful as possible to the source foodsphere, generating an effect of suspension of disbelief. By contrast, we stressed the unavoidability of “*translation*” processes, whose traces are in any cases identifiable at different levels. Such observations open the way to interesting reflections in the field of semiotics of culture, which will be presented more in depth in the following paragraph.

6.3.2 From a Cultural Perspective: Food and “Translation” Processes

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the same definition of *ethnic* food implies an external and foreign look, which, while getting in contact with a certain culinary system, *re-defines* it according to its own cultural background. Eating ethnic food, definitely, means *eating the food of the Other*. Food clearly emerges as a language expressing cultural *identity* and, at the same time, *alterity*:

Food tells not only how people live but also how they think of themselves in relation to others. A people's cuisine, or a particular food, often marks the boundary between the collective self and the other. [...] The worldwide phenomenon of "ethnic" or "cultural" revivals, then, must be seen as a presentation and reinterpretation of the self. (Ohnuki-Tierny 1993, 3–4)

After all, as Paul Ricoeur (1990) reminds us, the *ipseity* (or selfhood) of the self implies alterity (or otherness) to such an extent that it cannot be grasped without it. We briefly considered such an issue in the previous (Chapter 2). Here we would like to focus more specifically on the *frontier* as the space where different identities meet, collide, and sometimes get confused with one another.

Recalling the difference among *boundary*, *border*, and *frontier*, Franco La Cecla (1997) stresses the *dramatic* and transformational structure of the latter, which is characterised as a sort of *terrain-vague*, or no-one's-land where two "diversities" face each other (cf. 134). This evokes what Lotman (1992) observes in relation to the structure of cultures: any cultural system lives not only according to the laws of its own self-development, but also incorporates a variety of collisions with other cultural structures, which influence it from the outside ([ET 2009], 65). To transform itself from "foreign" to "own", any external element must take a *name* in the language of the internal culture. Rather than being an orderly system, therefore, any culture represents a random structure that is immersed in an external world and attracts it toward its interior, afterwards expelling it in a re-elaborated and (re-)named (that is, "organised") form, according to its own language. Such external world, that the considered culture identifies as chaotic, is actually itself already organised, according to a language which is unknown to that culture. These processes, which can assume a *gradual* (predictable) or *explosive* (unpredictable) character, recall what is generally referred to as *translation*.

Central issue of the present research—as stated by its same title—, translation

represents a very complex and multifaceted concept.⁵ According to its etymology, which recalls the Latin *translatio* (deriving from *trans* and *latum*—which is the supine form of *fero*), it literally means “to carry or bring across”. The modern Romance variations of the term come instead from the Latin *traduco*, “to lead across”, while the Slavic and Germanic languages (except for the Dutch *vertaling*, which would correspond to a “re-language-ing”) use calques of the same source (cf. Kasparek 1983, 83). As Maurizio Bettini (2012) reminds us, however, various expressions in different languages recall the processes of translation making reference to processes partially differing from the mechanisms presupposed by these Latin expressions. Specifically, making reference to the Roman period, he opts for a conception of translation in terms of *vertere*, that is, a process of metamorphosis implying both change and maintenance of meaning (XV). If the sense takes on new *forms* and *figures* (*ibid.*, 38–41), it still maintains a link with its original manifestation:

Il testo *conversus* adesso è un altro, certo, ha mutato la propria *forma*. Eppure anch'esso serba *documenta* o *indicia* della sua precedente condizione. Contemporaneamente, [...] certi elementi già presenti nell'originale costituiscono altrettante premonizioni, metaforiche o metonimiche, che indirizzano verso la nuova forma linguistica. (*ibid.*, 55)

(The *convesus* text is certainly another text, as it has changed its *form*. However, it has maintained some *documenta* or *indicia* of its previous condition. At the same time, [...] certain elements, which were already present in the original form, represent a sort of metaphorical or metonymic premonitions leading to the new linguistic form [translation mine]).

⁵ This brought us to place the word within quotation marks throughout the pages of this work, together with other terms—such as *tradition*, *innovation*, etc.—which, as we will see in the following, are equally not easily or univocally definable.

According to this view, translating does not simply mean “carrying or bringing” a same text “across” different languages, but rather changing its identity to make it become different, that is, “other from itself”. In Bettini’s view, the idea of *fidelity* or faithfulness related to translation arose only in a second moment, with the so-called Western modernity (*ibid.*, XI), specifically with respect to the religious sphere (*ibid.*, 189–261).

Many other scholars have focused on such topics (cf. in particular Mounin 1963; Nida and Taber 1969; Steiner 1975; Snell-Hornby 1988; Petrilli 1999-2000; 2000; 2001; Eco 2003), investigating translation processes not only as regards to literary texts, but also at a more general level, considering them as *sign operations*⁶ (cf. Fabbri 1998; Ponzio 1999-2000; Anderson 1999-2000; Eco 2003). What is particularly interesting to remark in this context is the indissolubility between alterity and translation (cf. Brisset 2000), which identifies the latter as the “experience of the foreign” (Berman 1984): translating means “bringing” external elements into a cultural language—or, more generally, system. From this point of view, it operates on the “sense of the other” (cf. Augé 1994), recalling particular dynamics related to power and ideology (Brisset 2000). Building on Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* (1927), the “being there” describing the existence of human beings, we could therefore say that existence itself really comes to exist when it is “brought into the here”, that is, when it is *translated*. Such process implies specific dynamics of appropriation that, however, should always be related to a logic of *reciprocity* (cf. Steiner 1975; Brisset 2000) in order to make translation effective, correct, and functional. Here it is where the so-called *paradox of translation* (Ponzio 2001) arises:

The text must remain the same, while becoming other,
simply because it has been reorganized into the expressive

⁶ “Translation cannot be restricted to the field of linguistics: it involves semiotics, the general science of signs. But even before being an object of *semiotics*, translation is a *sign operation*. This is so not only in the banal sense that translation occurs among signs, but also in the sense that it cannot be reduced to the linguistic-verbal, but rather spreads throughout the whole sign sphere. Where there are signs, where there are semiotic processes, there is translation” (Ponzio 1999-2000, 5).

modalities of another language. [...] The translated text is simultaneously identical and different. (5–6)

Particularly, traductology, since the 17th century, has generally identified three main classes or types of translation. Dryden (1680) describes as *metaphrase* the process of converting a text word for word, line by line, from one language into another (a sort of blind literalism). By contrast, by *imitation*, he refers to the process of recreation and interpretative parallel that can involve not only the variation but also the forsaking of words and meanings. According to him, the true road for the translator lies neither through the former nor through the latter, but rather consists in *paraphrase*, that is, the “translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense; and that too is admitted to be amplified, but not altered” (in Sargeaunt 1913). Goethe’s tripartition (1819) includes a first mode making foreign matters enter people’s daily and domestic native sensibility imperceptibly; a second mode of appropriation through surrogate, where a native garb is imposed on the alien form; and a third, highest mode aiming at achieving perfect identity between the original and the translated text by producing a new *tertium datum* which generally provokes great resistance within the general public (cf. also Steiner 1975). Also Humphrey (1559) distinguishes among literalism (condemned as *puerilis et superstitiosa*), free or licentious adaptation, and a just *via media*, aiming at attaining *plenitude*, *purity*, and *aptitude*.

Although these models are primarily referred to verbal language, they seem to be partially extendible to the domain of food, which—as previously observed (Chapter 1)—is itself generally considered as a *language* expressing sociocultural structures. Specifically, the first reading of the analysis identified two main tendencies with respect to the considered cases: *domestication* (also referred to as *free translation*) recalls the attempt to adapt the source foodsphere to the target foodsphere, *bringing the author to the reader* (Schleiermacher 1838); *foreignisation* (also referred to as *faithful translation*) rather stresses the need of *bringing the reader to the author* (*ibid.*), focusing on the source foodsphere.

However, such classification proved to be too simplistic to describe the specificity of the observed phenomena. The above-mentioned definitions and classifications, moreover, point out the need of addressing a more general issue: can we properly speak of *translation* when dealing with food? If it is true that there is a transposition⁷ from a culinary system to another, it is also undeniable that a sort of *simulation* takes place in these cases. The ethnic eating experience does not rely on depth and funded knowledge, but rather on superficial curiosity and stereotyped constructs: restaurants communicate to eaters only what the latter *can* and *want to* understand (La Cecla 1997, 70), enhancing a sort of *alienation* of the culinary code from the source foodsphere. What is presented as *authentic* and *traditional* is itself the result of an internal look somehow imitating the external look whose “taste” it has to fit with. Moreover, as mentioned in the previous, the same concept of “tradition” is complex and multidimensional: often erroneously confused with a static element, it rather implies a dynamic process involving continuous transformations and changes⁸—and so, in a sense, a series of *translations*.

Least common denominator of difference, food comes to represent an easily crossable frontier, where alterity assumes the form of an exotic and “palatable” experience based on stereotyped visions and intersubjectively shared images (La Cecla 1997, 65). This is why, according to La Cecla, a restaurant cannot offer a real understanding of the cuisine of another culture, but just a temporary and limited experience of contact with it. Roland Barthes presents a similar perspective in *L’Empire des Signes* (1970): according to the French scholar, eating ethnic food can certainly favour the approach to different aesthetics and new cultural systems, emphasising at the same time the moral presuppositions of one’s own culture. On the other hand, unless the ethnic eating experience does not produce a comparative

⁷ Which could be defined in terms of an *interlingual* or *proper translation* according to Jakobson’s tripartition (1959), which, however, is not particularly pertinent in this case, but proved to me more useful for the discussion presented in Chapter 2 (cf. §2.1).

⁸ Many of the traditions that people consider as very ancient in their origins were not even actually sanctioned by long usage over time, but rather invented quite recently. Hobsbawm and Ranger explore examples of the process of invention of traditions in their book *The Invention of Tradition* (1983). As regards to the specific case of food, we carried out a research about the establishment of the “Italian tradition” of pasta and the role of advertisement in such dynamics (cf. Stano 2012; 2014).

interpretation of those cultures and foodspheres—which rarely happens—, the event tends to remain confined to a profusely superficial consumer pastime. La Cecla therefore proposes to conceive food as a form of *misunderstanding* (1997): food represents an easily crossable frontier, that is, the space where the incommensurability of cultures gives way to a very partial encounter and comparison. Such encounter, although partial, makes cultures recognise themselves as different and separate, but not necessarily irreconcilable. Adopting the terminology of traductology, therefore, it could be argued that, beyond any attempt to adapt the ethnic eating experience either to the source or the target foodsphere, the only possible translation of the culinary code—at least as regards to the ethnic eating experience—seems to be the *via media* identified by the previously cited scholars. In other words, even more than in the case of verbal language, in order to make translation processes effective and real, a new “food language”—neither coinciding with the internal nor with the external one—should be created or simulated, expressing the impossibility to opt for one language instead of the other. Evidently, this does not deny that some cases could be more inclined to recall one foodsphere or another, with manifest implications at different levels of the eating experience. On the other hand, such an idea risks to be simplistic and still unable to describe the considered processes at a semiotic level, as it seems to leave aside a series of (either conscious or unconscious) dynamics related to *power* and *ideology*, as well as other factors, which play a crucial role in these phenomena. The misunderstanding itself cannot be seen as a balanced *via media* between two “authentic” languages. First of all, because, as mentioned in the previous, there is no authenticity nor tradition, as they represent themselves the result of unceasing transformational—that is, *translational*—processes. Secondly, because, rather than balance and equilibrium, the same concept of misunderstanding recalls a *dynamic force*: building on Bloom’s definition of *misreading* (1975), we could describe it as the space for “creativity” and “innovation”, as it engages with the deeper and more unwieldy impulses which are intrinsic to the codes in translation. The internal thus meets the external,

the self merges with the other, the *ethical* (that is, *general*, cf. Bettini 2012, XIII) level integrates itself with the *emic* (that is, *local*, cf. *ibid.*) level, with a crossing point that is never fixed nor univocally established. Here it is where different models, external to the theory of translation, can play a crucial role in the understanding of the dynamics underlying the here-considered transformations. Particularly, it seems very interesting to consider in this case Landowski's model describing the interactions between identity and alterity (1997). According to the French scholar, with *assimilation* the Other is disqualified as a subject: "its" singularity does not refer to any formal identity and its alterity is reduced to one's own identity so that it can be integrated into the environment "absorbing" it. Such process of standardisation and "ingestion" of the Other by the Self is strongly centripetal, leading Landowski to describe it in terms of a *conjunction* of identities. By contrast, *exclusion* denies the Other as such through confinement and elimination, not in a reasoned connection (as in assimilation) but in a more passionate relationship. The shared feature of these two configurations is that otherness, faced with a referential consistent identity, is always conceived as a threatening difference coming from the outside. However, unlike the first configuration, exclusion is based on a centrifugal movement, implying a *disjunction* of identities. In *segregation (non-conjunction)* the Other is recognised in spite of "his" difference, but still with a fundamental ambivalence between the inability to assimilate him and the refusal to exclude him. Finally, with *admission (non-disjunction)*, a permanent construction of the multicultural collective subject can take place, as differences are attested and accepted, promoting the encounter between one's own identity and alterity. Building on this model, it could be argued that, in order to go beyond what Barthes refers to as a "superficial consumer pastime", the ethnic eating experience should be established according to the model of admission. "Innovation" and "creativity"⁹ are undoubtedly

⁹ Even these terms, generally subject to erroneous interpretations and uses, imply complex dynamics related to the temporal dimension and to specific processes intervening on oppositions such as old/new, continuous/discontinuous, etc. that cannot be described in depth in this context. We kept such denominations as they are usually used in the observed eating experiences, considering them in

permitted, but always guaranteeing a minimum degree of closeness to the referential foodsphere (what is generally referred to as *authenticity*). In other words, even in those cases where “domestication” seems to be preferred, *transfere/traducere* (*translating*) should never be confused with *trādere* (*betraying*): “bringing/leading” food from a foodsphere to another does not mean completely “handing over or exposing” it to the target foodsphere, but rather to mediate between their languages. Although partial and incomplete, therefore, a *translation* process is certainly—and unavoidably—present in the ethnic experience. What is more, as we observed in the analysis, any attempt to completely conceal it is doomed, as its traces can be perceived and identified at different levels.

Rather than adopting La Cecla’s concept of *misunderstanding*, therefore, we propose here to consider the idea of an *incomplete*—or rather *imperfect*, as Franciscu Sedda (2012) would suggest—and *unceasing translation*. This implies never overlooking the important role played by the *temporal* dimension in such dynamics: yet La Cecla (1997, 139) insisted on the need of interpreting the misunderstanding not as the opposite of the *understanding*, but rather as a temporarily marked understanding, that is, the understanding that “it takes time” to cross the *frontier* of alterity. Translation processes can never be conceived as done or complete, but should be seen as *in constant becoming*. Furthermore, as mentioned in the previous, their efficacy relies precisely on such dramatic and transformational character. It is in this sense that, more than the *past*, ethnicity seems to recall the *future* (cf. Leroi-Gourhan 1945).

6.3.3 Still Open Questions and New Prospects

Due to the need of circumscribing the field of research, many aspects could not

terms of elements or practices ostensibly showing a “break” with the source foodsphere, generally by introducing elements related to the target food context.

be covered or adequately examined in this context. Different times, for instance, we put the emphasis on the importance of *hierarchical* or *gender issues*, noticing that their role within the foodsphere could be analysed more in depth. More attention could also be devoted to the side of the arrangement of the ethnic eating experience, directly accessing the kitchens for a field research and comparing not only *recipes*, but also and above all the *practices of preparation* of food (peeling, skinning, cooking, etc.) and the definition of other elements. Particularly, it would be interesting to analyse specific techniques of cooking—such as frying or simmering, which assume particular features and meanings in *washoku*, or *tataki* and *teriyaki*, which are considered typical of the Japanese cuisine—, as well as certain techniques of cleaning and cutting raw food.¹⁰ All these aspects, such as many others, would offer new significant elements for the analysis of the translation processes related to the Japanese foodsphere and their effects of meaning.

Further efforts, moreover, should certainly be devoted to the analysis of *taste*, which is strongly valorised in *washoku*,¹¹ as well as in other foodspheres, still representing a scarcely investigated topic within the semiotic arena. As mentioned in the opening (Chapter 1), the gustatory perception depends on the interaction between biological and physiological components, on the one hand, and sociocultural dynamics and inter-subjectively defined patterns of valorisation, on the other hand. Constantly hovering between *neophobia* (prudence, fear of the unknown, and resistance to innovation, Fischler 1990) and *neophilia* (exploration and need for change, novelty, and variety, *ibid.*), taste represents a *cultural construct*: in addition to the physiological dimension, the taste performance is often linked to social dynamics (cf. in particular Boutaud 2005; Perullo 2008). It would be essential, therefore, to analyse not only the semiotic traits of the gustatory dimension and its links with the other senses (cf. Dufrenne 1987; Merleau-Ponty 1945), but also and most importantly the interactions of society,

¹⁰ Whose emblematic example is the preparation of *fugu*, requiring the particular ability to remove toxic parts and avoid the contamination of the meat, which could be otherwise lethally poisonous.

¹¹ With particular reference to *umami*, as highlighted in Chapter 4.

culture, and perception. Specifically, more attention should be paid to the spatial and temporal syntax of the tasting experience, conceiving the moment of gustatory sanction as the encounter between physical sensations and sociocultural constructions. Furthermore, it would be useful to analyse taste in relation to its different regimes, functions, and practices, as well as with respect to the forms of communication expressing it. Building on Hladick and Picq's analysis (2001), for example, Jean-Jacques Boutaud (2005) has identified the main constitutive functions of taste: the *perceptual* or *perceptual-cognitive* function, operating at the level of categorisation; the *savoury* function, namely the recognition of flavours; the *transmission* function, concerning the progressive learning underlying taste; the *adaptation* function, allowing people to adapt to the environment by means of both genetic and social transmission; the *hedonic* function, linked to pleasure; the *creative* function, resulting from particular combinations of foods; and the *homeostatic* function, linked to the idea of balance. These functions, which should be conceived as systematically defined tools for the understanding of the gustatory sphere, should be further discussed and enhanced, proving their applicability to specific case studies and their usefulness not only for the process of tasting *per se*, but also for the analysis of the processes of "translation" of the culinary code. Furthermore, the analysis of the main communicative codes associated with the tasting performance—e.g. the vocal code, the mimic code, the gestural code, the spatial code, the temporal code, the ritual code, the narrative code, etc. (cf. Boutaud 2005)—could add on interesting observations, relating the gustatory perception to tactile, auditory, olfactory, and visual sensations, always considering the important role played by sociocultural processes, as well as the centrality of passions and the thymic sphere. Such perspective could enhance not only the here presented analysis,¹² but also, at a more general level, the methodological reflection concerning the analysis of practices, as well as the debate on the possibility of *interaction* with other domains of knowledge (such as the

¹² Where, as mentioned different times throughout the work, we decided to focus mainly on the spatial dimension and corporeality, favouring sight rather than taste or other senses.

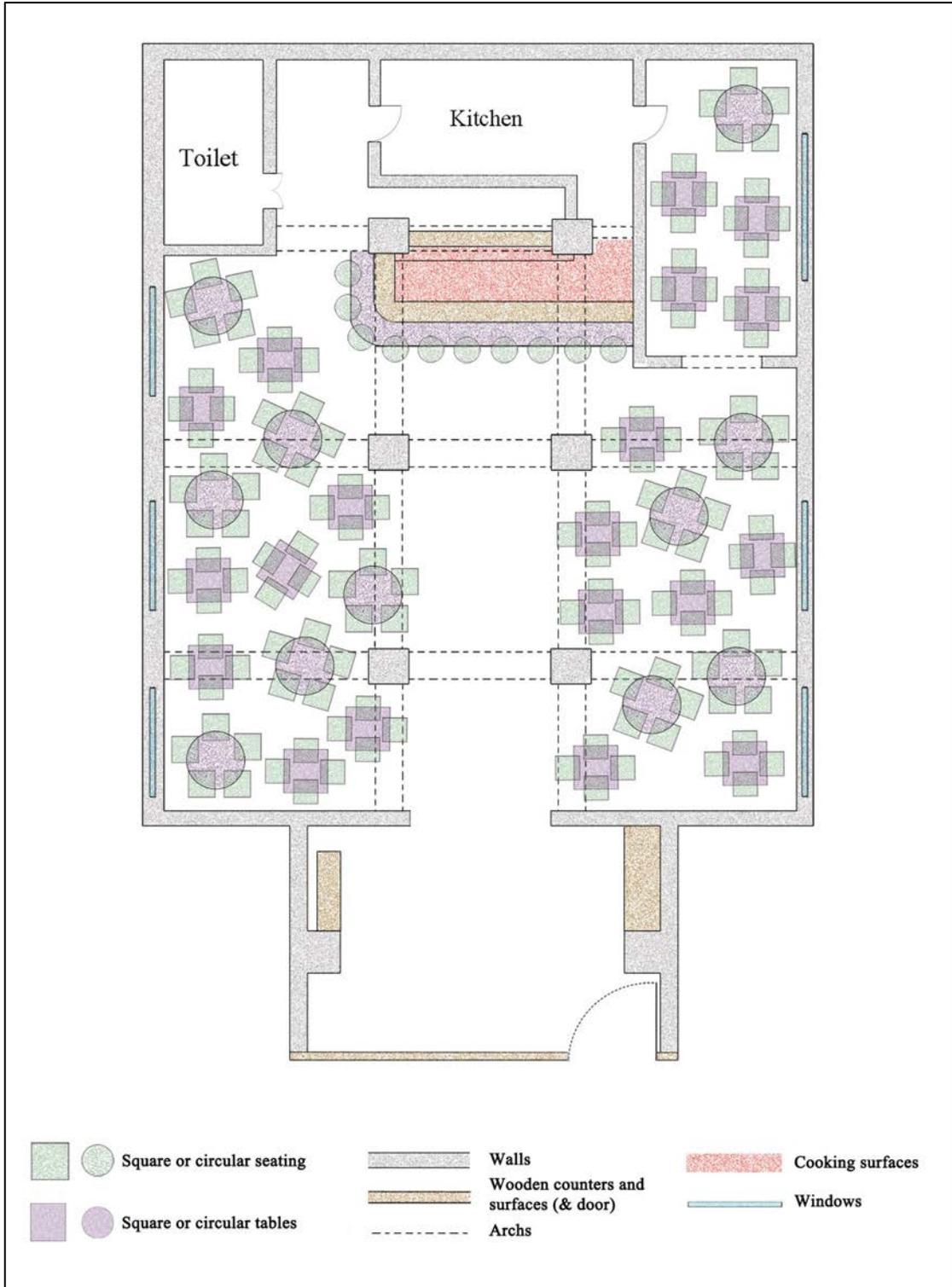
neurosciences) and the possibility of development of the so-called biosemiotics, probably leading to new interesting epistemological observations. Particularly, as regards practices, it seems interesting and urgent to focus more attentively on Empirical Users, here just marginally considered when dealing with the social subjects interacting with space and recalling the proximity or dissonance between them and the level of textual strategies (Model Users). This would mean to consider not only the practices related to tasting, but also people's movements and facial expressions, as well as their gestures, verbal acts, etc., in order to grasp the effects of meaning arising from them, while at the same time trying to implement the methodological tools for their observation and analysis.

Finally, we should not forget the important role played by mass and new media communications in the creation of a given *imaginarium* surrounding sushi and, more generally, the Japanese foodsphere, as well as other foods and cuisines. Following in the footsteps of many scholars mentioned in Chapter 1, the semiotic eye could therefore look at the various representations concerning food, analysing the particular valorisations resulting from them. The referential frame of the analysis could also be extended to different *ingredients*, *dimensions*, or even *foodspheres*. In addition to public eating places, moreover, different phenomena related to translation processes could be taken into consideration: the dynamics related to *agriculture* and *livestock holdings*, the features of *markets* and *food distribution chains*, the hybridisation processes related to *mass migrations*, the so-called “*glocalisation*”, etc. It could be also very interesting to invert the perspective of analysis, investigating how the so-called Westernisation of Japan has modified *washoku*, bringing to the new forms of *yōshoku*, that is, the “western-style cuisine” that has spread in the country after the end of the *Sakoku*, the foreign relations policy stating that no foreigner person—or food—could enter Japan and no Japanese could leave it.

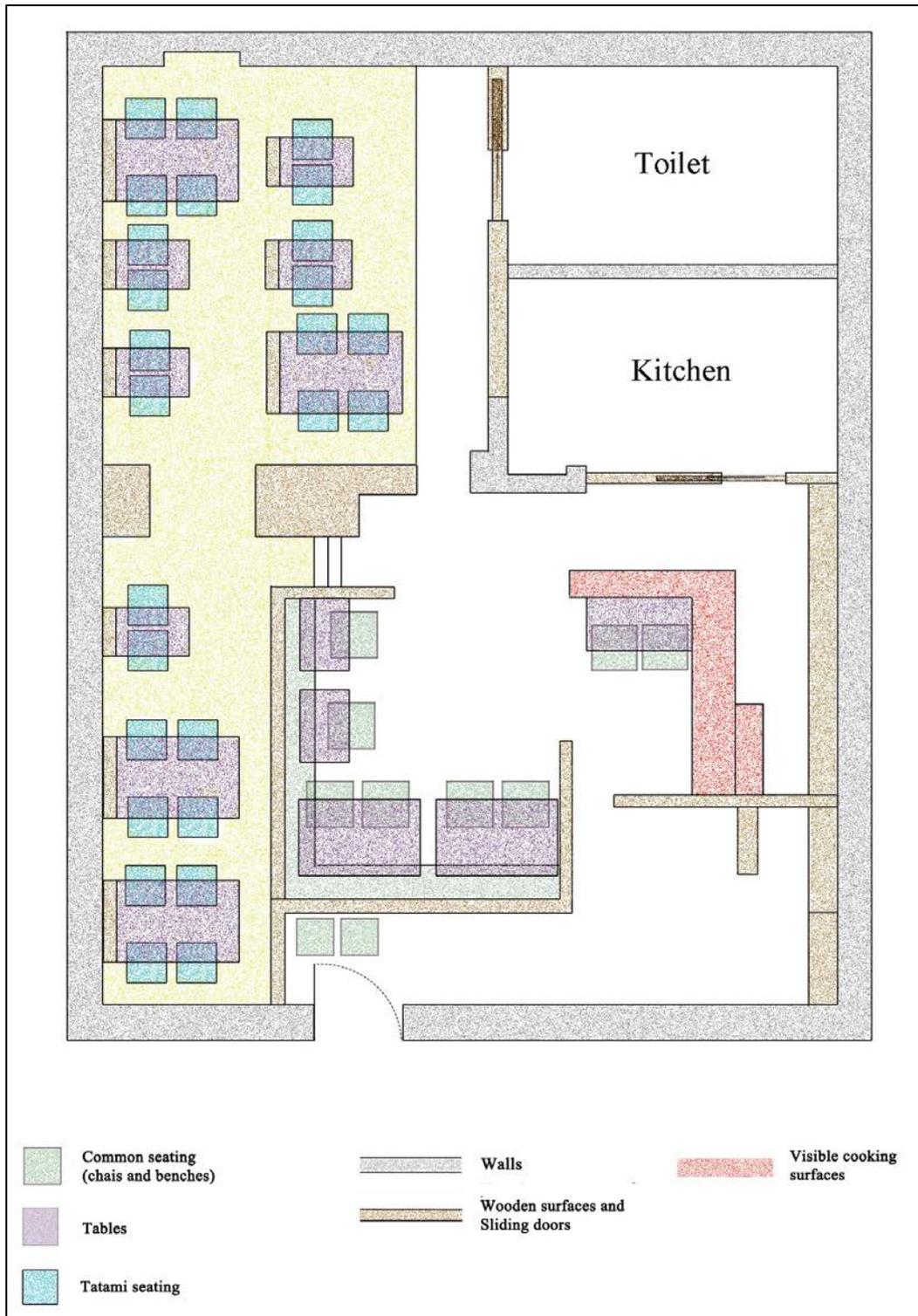
These issues, such as many other points briefly mentioned or rapidly sketched throughout the pages of this work, represent just some of the many still open questions that could—and should—be addressed from a semiotic point of view,

not only in relation to the here analysed aspects, but more generally with respect to food-related issues. Evidently, such a wide set of issues requires enhancing the efforts of semiotics in this field, promoting new investigations and implementing the existing methodological tools. Without claiming to be comprehensive or complete, therefore, the present research was intended to shed new light on a certainly partial but crucial—and so far mainly neglected—dimension related to the food universe, building the path for new developments and prospects.

APPENDIX
MAPS AND LEGENDS



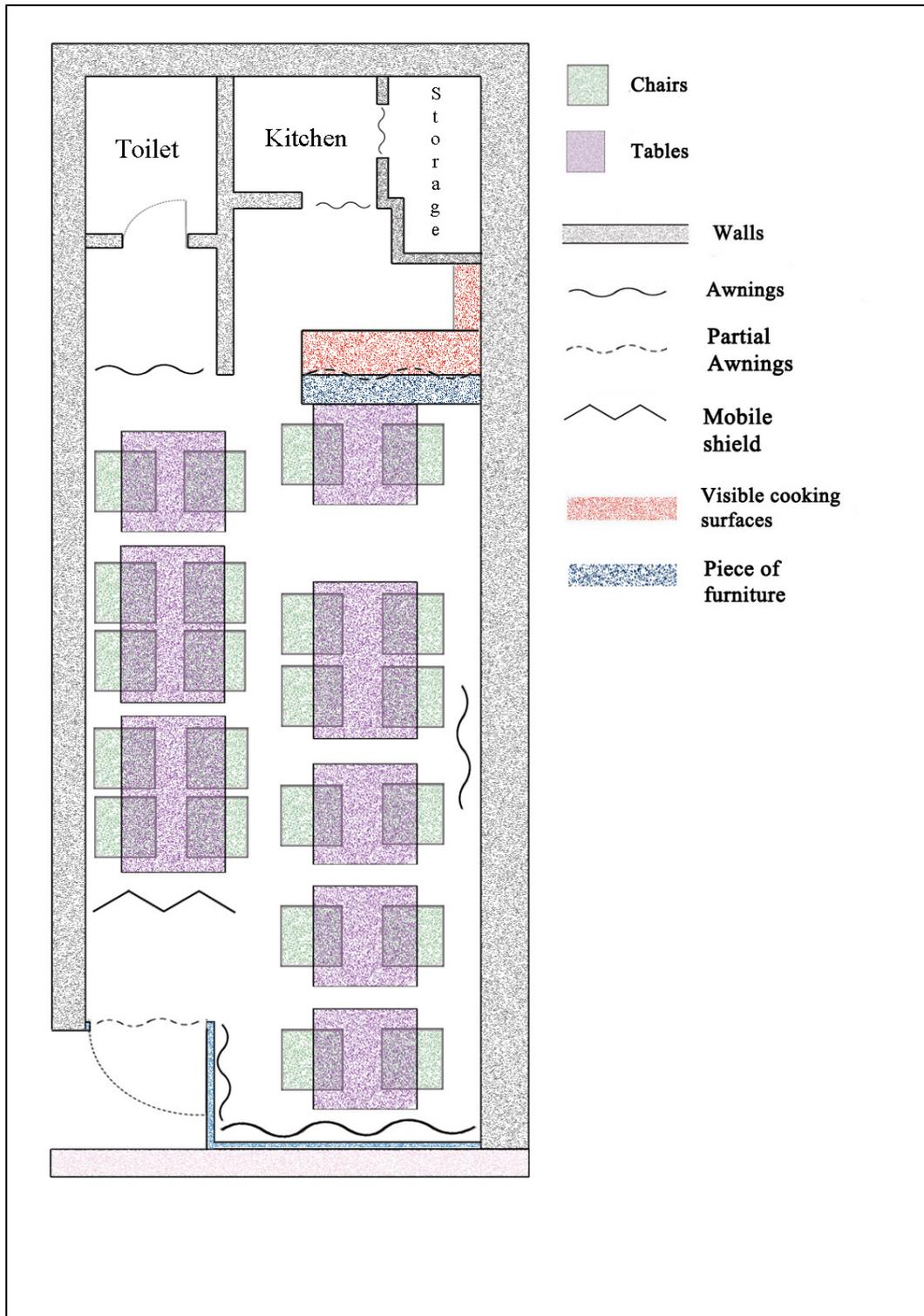
Arcadia (Turin, Italy)



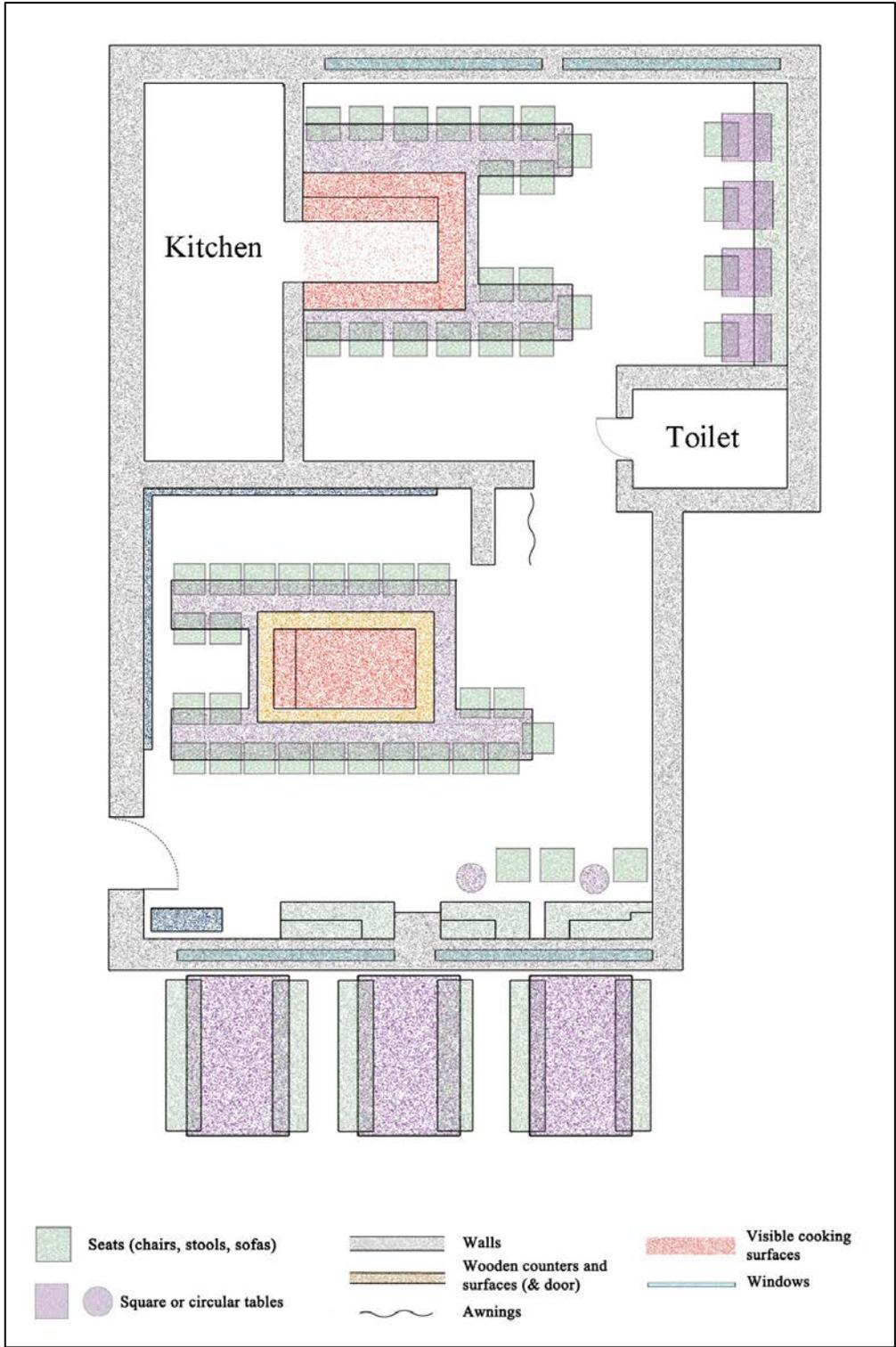
Wasabi (Turin, Italy)



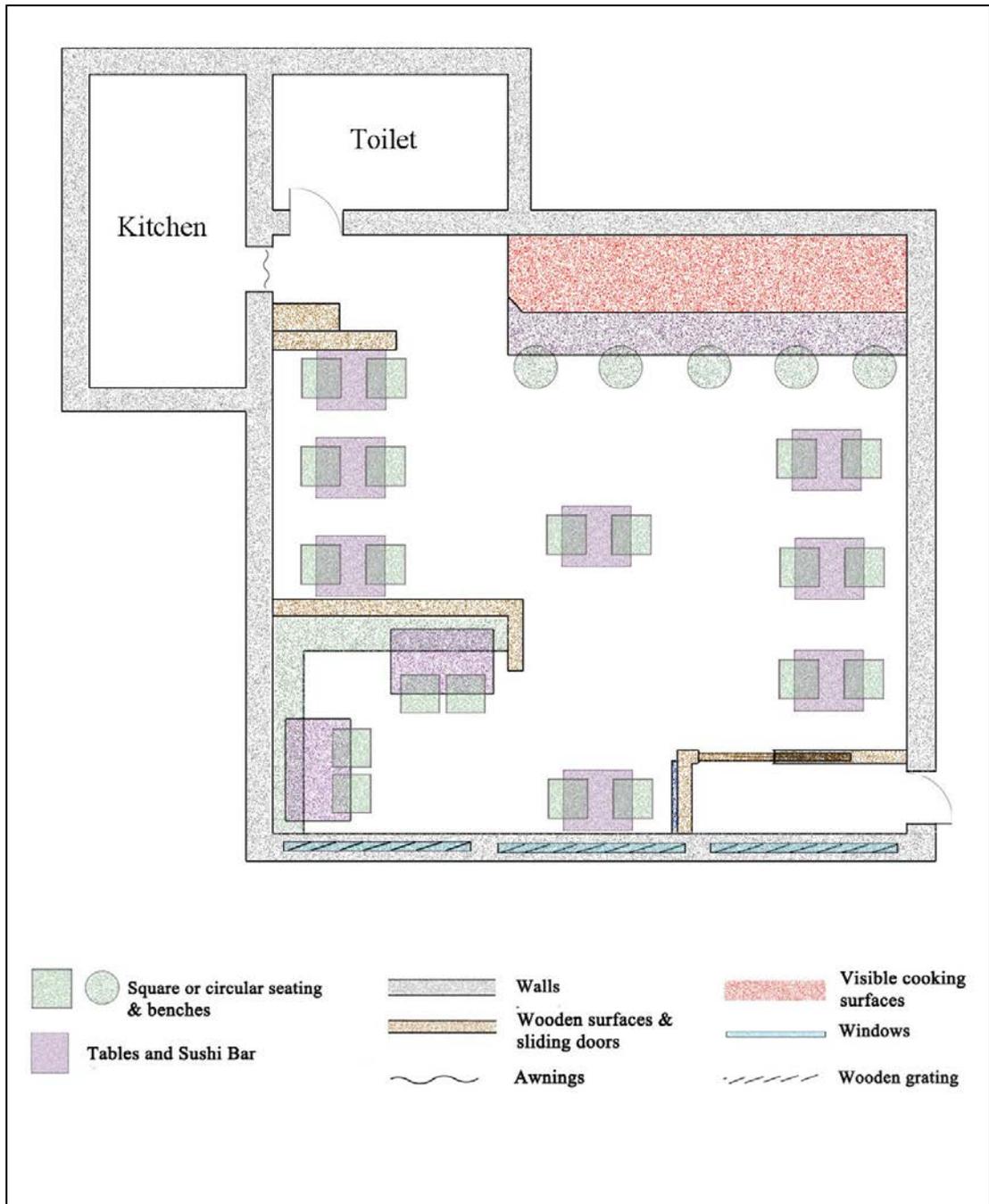
Guu Izakaya (Toronto, Canada)



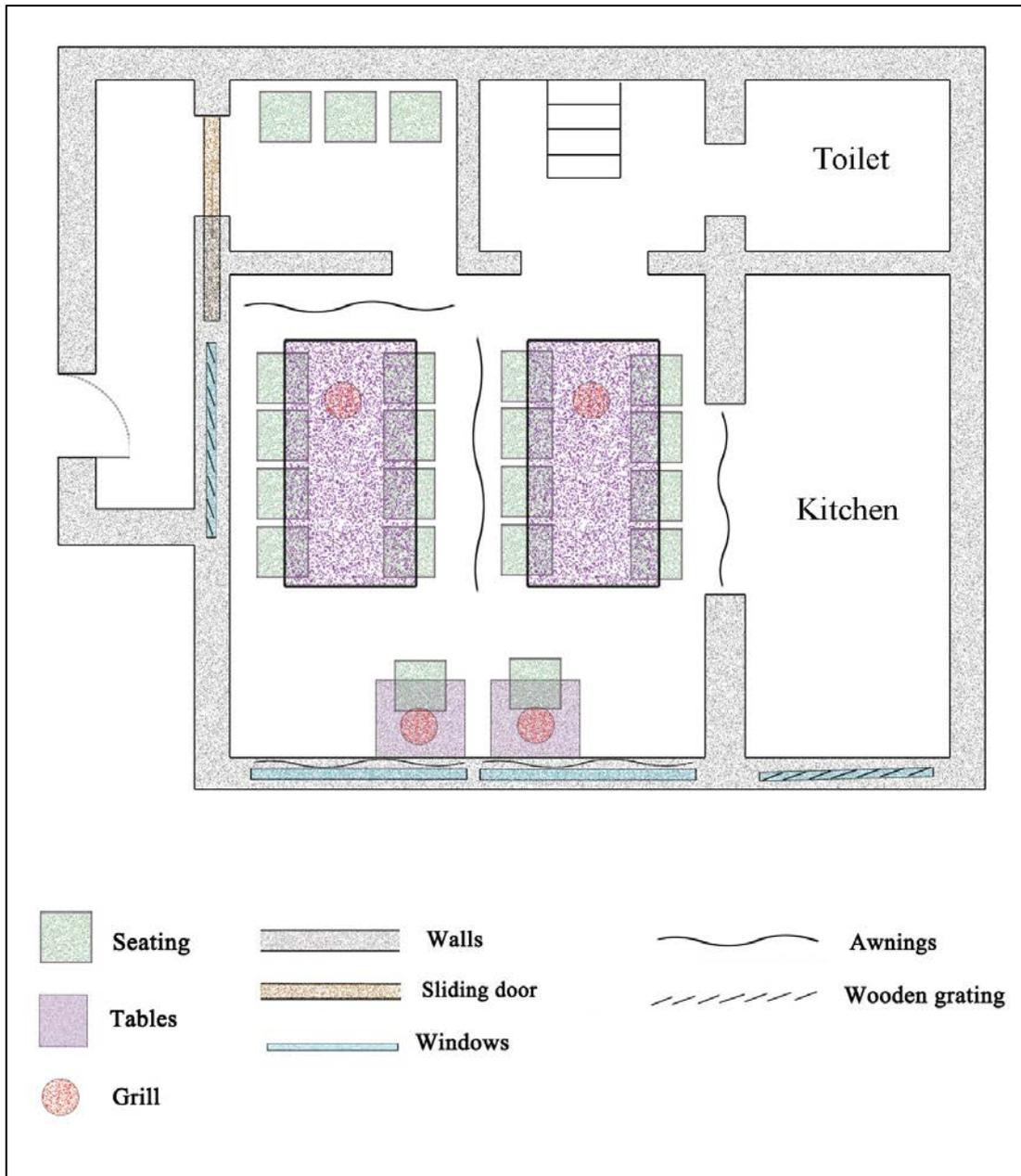
Shinobu (Toronto, Canada)



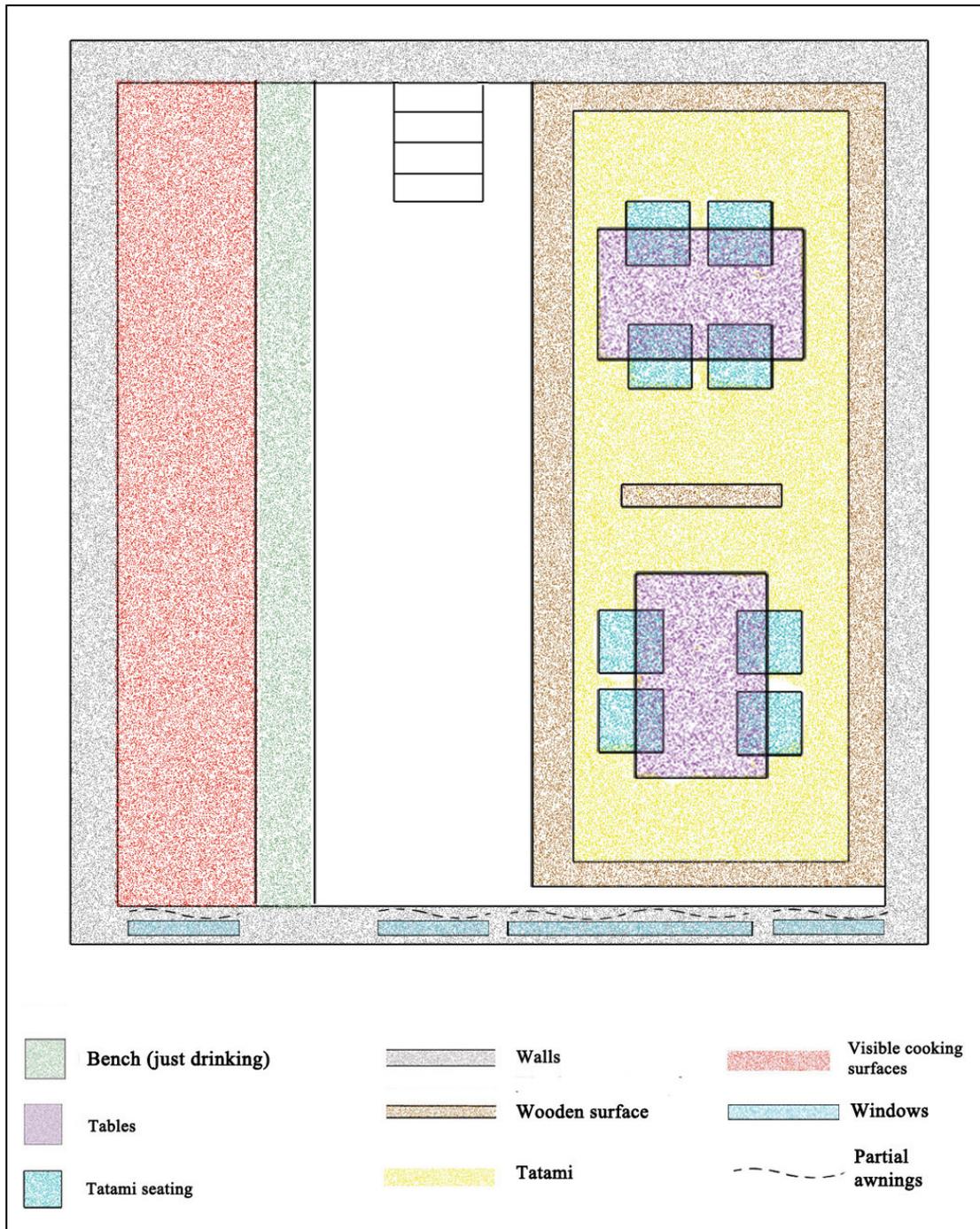
Ginger (Zurich, Switzerland)



Sansui – Sushi Room (Geneva)



Sansui – Yakiniku Room (Geneva)



Sansui – Tatami Room (Geneva)

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