VARIATIONS IN FOOD NAMES

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There are several ways that names for food items (fruits, vegetables, fishes, dishes, etc.) can vary across geographical regions. First of all, a food name can be commonly used in one region but not in another. In this case, either the same food item can be found in both regions but under different names, or the food item itself can be regional and rarely if ever found in other regions. If the item is found in both regions, we are dealing with synonymy in food names. Another type of food name variation occurs when a food name is used in two regions with a distinct meaning in each region. Here we are dealing with ambiguity in food names. This study is concerned with both synonymy and ambiguity in food name variation. The other type of variation that must be considered is where a food item itself, not just its name, is regional in that it is unknown or practically unknown in another region. The underlying, long-term objective of the project is to establish a methodology for identifying regional food name variations that can be used to establish baselines. These baselines can then be used as starting points in longitudinal studies of food name variation. However, the focus of this paper is to report on one baseline study that has been conducted concerning food name variation within French.

Before describing the baseline study, we must broach the question of what kind of geographical boundary to use: regions within a country or, alternatively, national boundaries. We started out looking at regions within the United States. A web page was set up that allowed individuals to report regional variations in food names, and we sent out a notice on an e-mail list of linguists inviting on-line submissions. When we received practically no submissions, we re-evaluated our approach. Discussions with several people in different parts of the United States revealed that they were uncertain of how food names might differ in other regions. Although they may have noticed variations immediately upon their arrival in a new region, they quickly adapted to the local dialect. Claims by respondents concerning whether a food name is regional were found to be unreliable. For example, a respondent from Indiana claimed that filbert is used in Indiana for the nut that the rest of the country calls a hazelnut. However, the website http://www.filbertfestival.com/ (accessed August 3, 2006) describes a festival in Springfield, Oregon, to celebrate the filbert. The website, states ‘Filberts & Hazelnuts are the same nut’, so, clearly, filbert is used outside of Indiana.

Research in three languages. During the re-evaluation of the data-gathering approach within the United States, the second author, Alec Westwood, was conducting a food name variation study within the Czech Republic. Thanks to a workshop that he taught to several groups of locals, he was able to ask about food name variations. He used the well-known example of English synonymy between pancake and flapjack, and asked
for similar examples in Czech. After asking dozens of people directly and receiving no examples in Czech, a different approach to eliciting food name variation data was used. A game was played that required locals to think of names for a given food item in as many languages as possible. This seemed to unlock people’s mental lexicon, and locals came up with some variations, such as karotka vs. mrkev for carrot between the city of Brno and the city of Znojmo in southern Moravia. However, even then, most variations turned out to be simply diminutive forms, such as rajcete vs. rajce for tomato. We even tried an approach in which a survey was delivered to everyone in an apartment building. People were happy to try to help, but after several weeks, when surveys were picked up, they provided practically no examples of food name variation. Many locals suggested that the Czech Republic was too small a country to have food name variations.

In the meantime, networking brought contact with Orlando Alba, a professor at our university who had done some research in lexical variation in the Spanish-speaking world. We explained to him our frustration in finding food name variation within the United States and within the Czech Republic. He responded that he was not surprised. He had found in his own research that while there is substantial lexical variation among Spanish-speaking countries, there is relatively little variation within a country. He suggested that the main reasons for uniformity within a country are communications within the country (national television and radio networks) and uniform textbooks used in schools. Another force that may promote uniformity is the UPCs (Universal Product Codes) that are found on most products at present. These codes are expressed both as Arabic numerals that can be read by a human and as bar codes that can be read by a bar-code scanner at a retail store.

The above experiences in English, Czech, and Spanish strongly suggested that we focus on food name variation across national boundaries. A natural application of this approach would have been to visit the Slovak Republic and compare the Czech Republic with the Slovak; however, this was not feasible in the present study. A study of food name variation within France was considered. In France, there are books showing dishes from all the regions of the country, such as Hanicotte (2005). However, restaurants all over France serve dishes from other regions. The regional distinctions are becoming quite blurred, and regional names are known outside their region of origin. One region of the United States where it might make sense to conduct a food name variation study is Louisiana, with its Cajun influence (Eble 1988). In the end, as will be seen below, it was decided to study variation in French food names across the France-Switzerland border.

A baseline study using French. Some research was conducted at the library of the University of Neuchâtel. It was found that a careful study of lexical variation had been done between France and the French-speaking part of Switzerland (Thibault, 1997). This study was based on the Trésor de la langue française, a huge database of French documents, compared with sources in Switzerland, especially newspapers and magazines. The dictionary resulting from the Thibault study was examined in detail and all food names were extracted. University librarians suggested that indeed there are a number of food name differences between the two countries. Apparently, some Swiss French food names are not known in France. It was decided to pursue this promising avenue.

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The list of food names supposedly specific to French-speaking Switzerland extracted from Thibault (1997) was then used as the basis for a baseline study. The question to be answered in the study was whether there is a significant difference (in the year 2006) between French food names in Switzerland and French food names in France. It was not clear how the baseline study would turn out. There was reason to believe that the study of French food names would show variation between France and Switzerland. There was also reason to believe that there would be no significant variation.

1. REASONS TO EXPECT VARIATION. Some reasons to expect significant variation in food names across the France-Switzerland border are that Switzerland is not part of the European Union, that France and Switzerland have cultural differences, and that Switzerland is a multi-lingual country while France is essentially monolingual.

Switzerland, for hundreds of years, has kept itself somewhat separate from the rest of Europe. It has not joined the European Union, and it has kept its own currency. Relocation within Europe is relatively easy. A European Union passport allows someone to live in another European Union country without applying for a visa. However, it is not easy for a foreigner to move to Switzerland. Work permits are difficult to obtain and Swiss citizenship even more so. These factors suggest that there may be more linguistic differences between France and French-speaking Switzerland than between France and French-speaking Belgium, for example.

Switzerland has its own culture. Tourists notice it as they cross the border into Switzerland. Cultural differences often include linguistic differences. The Swiss culture includes traditions concerning how food is prepared and consumed. One would expect some of these traditions to include Switzerland-specific food names.

There is only one official language in France. However, there are four national languages in Switzerland: German, French, Italian, and Romansh, three of them (German, French, and Italian) being official languages. With four languages in one small country, it would not be surprising if there were some borrowings among the languages that are not found outside Switzerland.

2. REASONS NOT TO EXPECT VARIATION. Some reasons not to expect significant variation are that travel between France and Switzerland is easy, that French television is seen in Switzerland, and that there is a sense of unity in the French-speaking world.

Despite the fact that Switzerland is not part of the European Union, travel into Switzerland is becoming easier. For example, in some cases, such as crossing the border from Germany into Switzerland by train, there is no longer a passport control. This encourages travel to Switzerland.

Television is a unifying factor in many countries, and several French television channels are widely available in Switzerland. This should be a factor in reducing lexical variation between France and Switzerland.

The French-speaking world has a name for itself, la francophonie, and people who are in other ways at odds with each other often join together in an effort to promote the use of French around the world.

3. METHODOLOGY. In order to determine whether or not there is a significant difference between French food names in France and Switzerland, we will start with the list of candidate lexical items that are believed to be specific to Switzerland and apply the following methodology.

Given a list of food names that are supposedly specific to one locale, that is, to a region defined by a country and a language within that country, the next step is to validate that list according to the locale, which we will call Locale A. This involves finding respondents who are native to that locale and who have not lived for any extended period in the other locale of study, which we will call Locale B. These respondents are then asked to give an explanation in the form of a brief definition or synonym of each food item with which they are familiar, or to indicate for a particular item that they are not familiar with that food name. For an item to be retained on the list, a majority of the respondents must not only recognize the food name but give identical or equivalent explanations of the meaning of the item.

The list is also presented to respondents who are native to Locale B and have not lived for any extended period in Locale A. These respondents are also asked to give an explanation for each item. Then the responses for Locale B are processed to divide them into three categories: known, ambiguous, and unknown. An item that is known is recognized by the majority of the Locale B respondents as the same food item identified by the Locale A respondents. An ambiguous item is recognized by the Locale B respondents as a food item but a different one than the food item identified by the Locale A respondents. An unknown item is simply not recognized by the Locale B respondents. In some cases, this will represent an instance of synonymy of food names. In other cases, it represents a regional food item.

If a majority of the validated food items are found to be either ambiguous or unknown to the Locale B respondents, we will declare the original list to represent very significant food name variation between the two locales. If one third or more of the items are found to be either ambiguous or unknown, then we will still declare a significant level of variation.

By recording the list of food names with their descriptions, along with the results of validation in Locale A and responses from Locale B, the same experiment can be conducted again with different respondents, to see if the results are replicated; and later, after several years, the experiment can be conducted yet again in order to measure diachronic changes in food name variation.

4. ANALYSIS. For this particular baseline study, a list of 43 candidate items was extracted from Thibault (1997), as described above. The validation step was done with three Locale A respondents who had grown up in various parts of French-speaking Switzerland and who had never lived in France. Of the 43 items, 11 were eliminated during the validation phase. In most cases, an item was either recognized by all three respondents or by none of the respondents. In two cases (ramias and damassine), one respondent identified the item as a dandelion or an eau-de-vie, respectively, as found in the Thibault (1997), while it was unknown to the other two. In one case (meuron), no one identified it as a blackberry but one thought it was a type of meat. Remarkably, this was the only instance of disagreement between the Locale A respondents and the Thibault dictionary. The list of 11 items eliminated during the validation phase is given in Appendix A.

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The 32 remaining food names were then presented to three Locale B respondents who had grown up in Paris and never lived in Switzerland. Their responses were almost entirely consistent. In one case, vacherin, which merits further research, there was disagreement among the Locale B respondents, some identifying it as a type of cheese while one identified it as perhaps being a dessert dish based on ice cream. Of the 32 items, 25 were either ambiguous or unknown to the Locale B respondents. This far exceeds the threshold of 17 (a majority of 32), so the validated list is declared to represent very significant variation. Seven items of the 32 items are no longer strongly regional and have crossed over into French food name usage. Details of the results are found in Appendix A.

5. CONCLUSION. The result of the baseline study of French food name variation between France and French-speaking Switzerland is clear: There is a very significant level of variation, including ambiguity, such as two widely different meanings for abricotine, and synonymy, such as raisinets in Switzerland and groseilles in France for the same fruit (red currants). Furthermore, the experiment revealed a high level of inter-respondent reliability, with Swiss-French respondents agreeing among themselves and French-French respondents agreeing among themselves. This suggests that we can assign a high level of confidence to the results. Furthermore, the methodology employed does not require respondents to speculate about the other locale. Each set of respondents considers only their personal experience with food names. Therefore, we claim that this methodology is sufficiently solid to justify its use in other food name variation studies and even other types of lexical variation.

Several years from now, baseline studies should be repeated in order to determine whether food name variation is increasing, decreasing, or remaining constant. Globalization tends to make things uniform across national boundaries, yet cultural variation does not appear to be disappearing. Indeed, a culture associated with a country often resists the intrusion of foreign items. A longitudinal study of food name variation would provide some insight into which force, globalization or cultural identity, is winning.

6. FUTURE WORK. Several additional studies within food name variation would be obvious follow-ons to this study. One would be to conduct exactly the same study with different sets of respondents from Locale A (French-speaking Switzerland) and Locale B (France), to determine whether the same result is obtained. It would be advisable to include more respondents in each group and to employ more formal statistical methods. It would also be interesting to look for new food items that have recently entered into Swiss French or for some reason were not included in the list used for the baseline study. I encountered one such item in the process of doing the research for this paper: girolle. A girolle has meant a type of mushroom for many years. However, more recently, there is another meaning: a type of edible decorative item made from scraped hard cheese that is rolled up to resemble a mushroom. The term also refers to a machine that is designed specifically to facilitate the creation of these cheese decorations (Girolle 2006).

An issue not addressed in the present study is how much difference justifies separate food names. Examples from the present study are whether cuchale and miche (both round breads) and whether knöpflis and spätzli (both very small boiled-flour dumplings) are

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sufficiently different to merit separate names. This issue, which is beyond the scope of the present study, should be addressed in future studies.

Another direction that future research could go is to study food name variation between France and French-speaking Canada. During the presentation of this paper in Toronto at LACUS 2006, an obvious example was found: a can of fruit drink described as containing bleuets et melon d’eau on one side and blueberry watermelon on the other side. In France, blueberries are myrtilles and watermelon is pastèque.

Switching from French to Spanish, a future study could involve Spanish food names in various Spanish-speaking countries. A different approach to obtaining preliminary data is described in Alba (2000). Here, instead of searching documents for references to food, respondents were asked to name food items, with no pictures or words as prompts. Then, a frequency analysis was done to determine the most frequently produced food names by respondents in the following countries: Chile, Spain, Mexico, Dominican Republic, and Argentina. Puerto Rico was also included, even though it is not a fully independent country. The one hundred most common food names for each of those countries were supplied to us by Professor Alba for analysis. The preliminary list of Spanish food name variations obtained using this methodology is shown in Appendix B. This list was produced with the help of two students, Marc Carmen, with English his first language and Spanish his second, and Leticia Klemetz, who grew up in Spain and translates professionally from English to Spanish.

A future study related to the work done in the Czech Republic could be to compare Polish food names in Poland with Polish food names in Chicago, which has a very significant Polish population.

Yet another possible direction for research in food name variation is to cross language boundaries as well as national boundaries. One multilingual project could begin with a data gathering phase of restaurant menus from all over the world and put them into an electronic corpus using a specialized markup language for menus. Then the corpus could be used as the basis for a multilingual terminology database of menu items, focusing either on the elements in descriptions of dishes or on the often idiosyncratic names of dishes, or both. Eventually, with the help of volunteer terminologists, such a database could be useful in creating more intelligible translations of restaurant menus than are typically found while traveling from country to country. Another multilingual project could begin with a database of UPCs (UPC 2006) for food items in some country and invite volunteers to find UPCs in their country and link them to the base set of UPCs. The UPCs would then be linked to points in a concept system.

Lexical variation is a vast area of research. By limiting lexical variation studies to one narrow domain, such as food names, it becomes more feasible to conduct rather exhaustive studies between two locales. Multilingual studies might also be feasible, especially in today’s Internet climate where ‘wiki’ (on-line collaborative) projects, such as Wikipedia (http://www.wikipedia.org/) have been so successful.

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REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: A BASELINE STUDY OF FRENCH FOOD NAME VARIATIONS

Eliminated because the Swiss locals did not recognize them (11):

- barbue: a young grape vine
- bondelle: a type of fish (scientific name Coregonus exiguus)
- cramias: a flower (dandelion)
- crotchon: a crouton
- damassine: a type of prune
- grabons: small pieces of pork fat (also called grebons or greubons)
- meuron: a wild blackberry
- nillon: remains after pressing oil out of walnuts
- pallée: a type of fish (scientific name Coregonus schinzii)
- stiflates: a delicate crispy pastry
- tête de marbre: a type of meat (cold cuts)

Known by Swiss locals, with results from French locals (32):

- abricotine: Ambiguous: a pastry in France, made with apricots; a liqueur in Switzerland, made from apricots
- atriau: a type of meat (flattened ball) made from pork liver: Unknown in France
- bircher: short for birchermüesli, a cereal made from oats, fruits, and (usually) nuts: Unknown in France
- biscôme: a baked item similar to gingerbread: Unknown in France
- bouchoyade: raw pork meat: Unknown in France
- boule de Bâle: a sausage similar to a cervelas: Unknown in France
- boule de Berlin: a deep fried pastry filled with jelly: Known in France
- branche: a type of chocolate in the form of a stick, eaten by children with bread: Unknown in France

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• bricelet: a small, crisp waffle: Unknown in France
• café complet: a light evening meal, usually coffee with bread and cheese or bread and jam: Unknown in France
• carotte rouge: beet: Unknown in France (they call it betterave)
• couenne: the crust of a cheese or ham: Unknown in France (for cheese, the French call it the croûte)
• croûte dorée: French bread: Unknown in France (they call it pain perdu)
• cuchaule: a round bread: Unknown in France
• flûte: Ambiguous: in France a large traditional bread; in Switzerland, a small, thin, salted bread stick
• fondant: a chocolate filling mixed with finely chopped almonds: Known in France
• herbettes: a mixture of fine herbs: Unknown in France (probably has another name in France)
• knöpflis: small pieces of salted flour-water mixture, eaten with a sauce, like pasta: Unknown in France
• miche: small, round bread: Unknown in France (although in a large dictionary)
• papet: a meal consisting of meat, potatoes, and vegetables, usually leek: Unknown in France
• porreau: leek: Unknown in France (they use the word poireau)
• raisinê: red currents: Unknown in France (they use the word groseilles)
• renversé: coffee: Known in France with more milk than coffee: Unknown in France
• ristrette: a very strong coffee: Unknown in France
• rösti: fried shredded potatoes: Known in France
• séré: a type of cream cheese: Unknown in France, similar to what they call quark
• spätzli: made from boiled flour, similar to knöpflis: Known in France
• taillaule: a light pastry made of eggs, flour, butter, and sugar: Unknown in France
• tresse: a braided white bread: Known in France
• vacherin: a type of cheese: Known in France
• wienerli: a type of sausage presumably from Vienna but not known there: Unknown in France (they would call it some kind of sausage)
• yoghourt: a variant spelling of yoghurt: Known in France as yaourt

Unknown in France: 23 of the above
Known in France: 7 of the above:
• boule de Berlin: this pastry has made its way into France
• fondant: chocolate with this type of filling is exported from Switzerland to France
• rösti: this fashion of preparing potatoes, similar to hash browns, has become known in France
• spätzli: this alternative to traditional pasta is also called pâtes d’Alsace (‘Alsacian pasta’)
• tresse: this type of braided bread is now available in France
vacherin: this type of cheese is now known in France
yogourt: this was recognized as a spelling variant of yaourt (the standard French spelling)

Ambiguous in France: 2 of the above:

- abricotine: in France, a pastry made with apricots; in Switzerland, a liqueur made with apricots
- flûte: in France a large traditional bread; in Switzerland, a small, thin bread stick

APPENDIX B: PRELIMINARY LIST OF SPANISH FOOD NAME VARIATIONS

synonymy:
- beans: frijol in Mexico but judía (also habichuela) in Spain; poroto in Chile
- cabbage: repollo in much of Latin America but col in Spain
- beets: betarraga in Chile but remolacha in Spain and Argentina
- peach: melocotón in Spain but durazno in Chile, Mexico, and Argentina
- corn: choclo in Chile but maíz in Spain and Mexico
- avocado: palta in Chile and Argentina but aguacate in Spain and Mexico
- shrimp: gamba in Spain but camarón in Mexico
- papaya: papaya in Spain but lechosa in the Dominican Republic

ambiguity:
- tortilla: thin unleavened bread in Mexico vs. thick with eggs in Spain
- manteca: lard in Spain but butter in Argentina