The Language of the Food of the Poor: Studying Proverbs with Jean-Louis Flandrin

David C. Sutton

One of the final actions of the sinking government of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 1980 was the bulldozing of all the buildings of the Université de Paris VIII in the middle of the Bois de Vincennes. There were administrative reasons for the demolition, and there is no doubt that the new Paris VIII buildings in Saint-Denis were superior, more permanent, and more weatherproof. Most people, however, saw an element of spite and revenge in the demolition of the so-called Workers' University, which had been so clearly the heir to May 1968 and the enemy of everything represented by the Pompidou and Giscard d'Estaing governments.[1]

Vincennes was run on the basis of *fraternité* and *égalité* (the '*tu*' form was used even by the administrators and the caretakers), but undoubtedly it had its superstars – and none more so than Jean-Louis Flandrin, whose groundbreaking writings on the history of food and the history of sexuality were beginning to place him as the heir-apparent to France's greatest social historian, Fernand Braudel (with whom he shared a background of teaching in Algeria).[2] Students (or 'participants') were keen to be admitted to Flandrin's *Histoire de l'Alimentation* course, and those who did gain admission soon discovered that a good deal of food history work (individual work and joint project work) was expected from them. As a delightful bonus, the 'work' included creating historically accurate menus and meals… and eating them. The students bought the food, which they cooked; Flandrin provided the rare and wonderful wines.

Jean-Louis Flandrin had been one of the founders of Vincennes in 1968 and his style was participative and collective in the best Vincennes tradition. All the committed participants in his course saw themselves as contributors to the project of establishing a definitive historical account of food, cooking, and gastronomy. It was important to the ethos of the course that participants were clearly seen to be studying the food of the poor just as much as the food of the rich.

With the launch of the magazine *L'Histoire* in May 1978 a platform was provided for publication of research topics emerging from Vincennes. Flandrin was involved with the new magazine from the first issue. Adopting the *nom de plume* of Platine, he immediately found a distinctive voice, combining erudition with advocacy. The voice of this new Platine is heard as early as issue number 2 of *L'Histoire* in a fascinating historical rumination on the significance of the colours of different types of wine which ends with a heartfelt plea for the preservation of low-alcohol local French *vins paysans* (less than eleven per cent, for those who had used to need to drink several bottles a day).[3]

The new Platine contributed a short piece on historical gastronomy to most issues of *L'Histoire* from 1978 to 1983. Increasingly these articles acknowledged the collective work of the Vincennes class, which he began to call the *Académie Platine*. To take just one further example, in November 1979 he contributed a companion piece on the temperatures of wine,[4] in which, among other insights, he noted that the idea of room-temperature red wine (especially Bordeaux) is fairly recent, with the first recorded use of the word *chambrer* in this sense dating from 1877.

'Platine' is the French form of the name of Bartolomeo Sacchi, known as Battista Platina, author of the landmark book of food lore, nutrition, and recipes entitled *De honesta voluptate* (first published in Rome in 1473, with a loosely-translated French version *Platine en francoys* first published in Lyons in 1505). What attracted Flandrin to Platina above all the other mediaeval writers and collectors of recipes was his insistence on the wonder and delight, the honest voluptuous pleasure, of food.

Flandrin finally outed himself as Platine in 1992, with the publication of his *Chronique de Platine*.[5] I do not know how much credence to give to his claim that the revelation was forced on him by his publisher Odile Jacob. It always seemed in our circles that the secret was fairly open, although *L'Histoire* did receive, and occasionally publish, attacks on the anonymous gastronome (*'Qui est Platine?'*), who was accused of wanting to be a populist journalist and a historian at the same time.

Despite the commitment to studying the food of the poor as well as the rich, and despite his great curiosity about all aspects of food history, there is no doubt that in the late 1970s and early 1980s Flandrin's own special research interests focused on gastronomy and the history of fine taste. In number 85 of *L'Histoire* he unveiled (under his own name) an essay entitled 'Pour une histoire du gout,'[6] which has some claim to being the finest short essay on food history, a marvellous distillation whose themes feed into various parts of the great *Histoire de l'Alimentation* (1996), known to the remnants of the old guard of Vincennes as *la bible*. One of the many joys, for a former Vincennes participant, of reading through the 915 pages of *Histoire de l'Alimentation* is to re-encounter there so many ideas, themes, debates that we pursued late into the evening all those years ago at Vincennes.

Flandrin was at his best in the demolition of facile food myths. He did this with calm but crushing simplicity. If mediaeval banquets had been typically gargantuan affairs with massive food quantities and huge piles of meat, why does every single painting of a mediaeval banquet tell a different story? The idea that overspicing in mediaeval times was a response to poor-quality meat is refuted just as easily by examining the cost of the spices. Diners who could afford such costly condiments would have had their own fresh meat supplies and would hardly be likely to have rotting flesh on their tables.

Whilst conducting his own researches on historical gastronomy and taste, Flandrin encouraged his students to identify and analyse sources for the food of the poor. Bucolic paintings, hospital and poorhouse accounts, and travel books provided some information, but it was thin compared to the recipe books, food guides, stewards' books, and banquet paintings which provided information about what the rich were eating.

Those of us committed to studying the food of the poor needed other sources, other insights. Flandrin asked us to begin a project to start to assess the potential value of proverbs. Could proverbs provide real information? Did they reveal the language of the food of the poor or were they, on the contrary, a trap for the historian full of unhistorical unrooted platitudes?

My own contribution to the proverb project, which began in 1978, was to research and analyse English food proverbs.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites Dr South (1634–1716) giving a strong view of the value of proverbs: 'What is a proverb, but the experience and observation of several ages, gathered and summed up into one expression.' The same idea was expressed in a pejorative way by Lord Chesterfield who advised his son that proverbs were 'the rhetoric of the vulgar man' and should be avoided by men of fashion. The greatest authority on proverbs (or paremiologist), Archer Taylor, on several occasions indicated his belief that proverbs reflect the interest and the world of the common people.

Despite the views of such authorities and paremiologists, it could be argued that there is a methodological leap of faith in the assumption that the voice of the proverb is the authentic voice of the 'common people.' It is not, however, an assumption that will be lightly dismissed by anyone who has read through our three principal English source books – which we will abbreviate to *ODEP*, Tilley, and Whiting.[7] (These three scholarly texts are carefully dated anthologies and form the basis for all the examples given here; very many collections of proverbs are, by contrast, of little historical value.)

Here are a dozen examples of the true voice of the English proverb (for convenience, all taken from Tilley):

Better no pies than pies made with scabby hands.
February rain fills the barn.
Keep your thanks to feed your chickens.
Money like dung does no good till it's spread.
Put your hand into the creel; you'll get either an adder or an eel.
A white loaf and a hard cheese never shame the master.
You cackle often but never lay an egg.
He has eaten a horse and the tail hangs out at his mouth.
Snow is white and lies in the dyke and every man lets it lie; pepper is black and has a good smack and every man does it buy.
Butter is mad twice a year.
Linconshire where hogs shit soap and cows shit fire.[8]

and

From three things God keep us: from powdered beef without mustard, from a servant that views himself; from a wife that is painted.

We may not always like the voice of our proverbs. Too often it is complacent, conventional and deferential. But most students of language and society would agree that it rings with an authentic tone of everyday English life, and that proverbs can form a true part of the historical record, provided that they are reliably dated.

It is noteworthy, and historically significant in itself, that collections of English proverbs (unlike French, Italian, or Spanish collections) contain very few examples of lore or advice about the art of cookery. What we do find in abundance, however, is folk-wisdom, evidence of familiarity and attitudes towards meals, eating and foodstuffs.

Let us look first at some foodstuffs. A good first example is provided by garlic, the quintessentially French flavouring that might be expected to have a proverbial history of English contempt. The opposite is true. Consider these proverbs:

Eat leeks in Lide and ramsins in May, and all the year after physicians may play [Lide = March; ramsins = garlic or wild garlic in dialect; proverb recorded 1558 and 1686].
Garlic makes a man wink, drink and stink [recorded 1510, 1594 and 1607].
We have eaten garlic everyone [recorded 1425].
The smell of garlic takes away the smell of onions [recorded 1599 and 1609].

These are proverbs of familiarity and affection. The first two are such lovely sayings that the *Académie Platine* paused for an extended discussion of them – although it should be confessed that the principal debate was as to whether 'wink' indicated 'sleepy' or 'randy.' Whichever interpretation one favours, our proverbs support the thesis that garlic was a popular (in both senses) English flavouring into the seventeenth century.

The proliferation of proverbs about a particular food may tell a historical story. For instance, English was found to have more proverbs about butter than any other language that we studied (we had no Dutch-speakers at that time). The typical note of familiarity and relish is sounded by this first example:

Boil stones in butter and you may sup the broth.

But consider the sheer quantity of English butter-proverbs (all examples from *ODEP*). There is no particular intention in this sequence, but I have tended to put the foodstuff proverbs first, and the mildly obscene ones come at the end:

That is for that, and butter's for fish.
As sure as if it had been sealed with butter.
Butter is good for anything but to stop an oven.
Butter is gold in the morning, silver at noon, lead at night.
That which will not be butter must be made into cheese.
It rains butter and cheese.
Fine words butter no parsnips [first recorded 1639; 'butter no cabbage' 1676].
Butter is mad twice a year.

As mad as May-butter.
Like butter in the black dog's throat.
To melt like butter before the sun.
Butter is once a year in the cow's horn.
No butter will stick to his bread.
As fat as butter.
As demure as if butter would not melt in her mouth [first recorded 1530].
They that have got good store of butter may lay it thick on their bread.
A rope and butter; if one slip t'other will hold.
What is a pound of butter among a kennel of hounds.
His bread is buttered on both sides.
It is a good knife; it will cut butter when it is melted.
To scold like butter wives.
Be not a baker if your head be of butter.
The bread never falls but on the buttered side.
He that would eat a buttered fagot, let him go to Northampton.
All is not butter that the cow shites.
Dab, quoth Dawkins, when he hit his wife on the arse with a pound of butter.

Set alongside the research done by Flandrin (and by his distinguished Paris-VIII participant Philip Hyman) on the increasing use of butter in English recipes,[9] the pattern that emerges from the proverbs would seem to confirm the surprising Flandrin-Hyman thesis (developed from Pliny) that butter was first a food of the barbarians and the poor and only later became a regular component of *haute cuisine*.

A quantitative analysis of foodstuffs in historical English proverbs reveals a number of unexpected favourites to place alongside butter. There are very few proverbs that refer, for instance, to pork or ham, whereas, most notably, goose, herring, flounder and leeks provide numerous examples. The herring-proverbs are especially widespread and their message is quite clear:

Of all the fish in the sea, herring is the king
[recorded 1583, 1599, 1601, 1639, 1659].

Consider, however, this whole array of proverbs of familiarity, which are especially striking in an age when few English people ever eat goose, herring, or flounder:

It is a sorry goose that will not baste itself.
There's meat in a goose's eye.
To steal a goose and give the giblets in alms.
Young is the goose that will eat no oats.
The goose pan is above the roast.
As good as goose skins that never man had enough of.

Set the hare's head against the goose's giblets.
As wise as a goose.
If I may not keep goose I shall keep gosling.
He that turns the goose should have the neck.
He hopes to eat of the goose that shall graze on your grave.
The goose drinketh as deep as the gander.
As close as red herring in a barrel.
Neither fish nor flesh nor good red herring.
Never a barrel the better herring.
It is kindly that the poke savour of the herring.
Fish for a herring and catch a sprat.
The weavers' beef of Colchester [i.e. sprats and small herrings].
What we lose in hake we shall have in herring
[a personal favourite, recorded 1602 and 1639].
Every herring must hang by its own gill.
As dead as a herring.
As flat as a flounder.
To leap like a flounder out of the frying pan into the fire.

In addition to conclusions drawn from quantitative analysis, the proverbs tell us about desired qualities. For instance, several proverbs identify hardness as the prime quality for cheese. They also give small insights into English practices:

After cheese comes nothing. After fish nuts [recorded 1609, 1623, 1639, 1721].
(It was a struggle to persuade the *Académie Platine* that the English could resolutely prefer to eat dessert before cheese.)

And some of the most resounding proverbs are the proverbs of food recommendation and preference:

If the partridge had the woodcock's thigh, 'twould be the
best bird that ever did fly.
Of wine the middle, of oil the top, and of honey the bottom.
Witham pike, England has none like.
Dunmow bacon, and Doncaster daggers, Monmouth caps and Lemster wool,
Derby ale and London beer.
Banbury zeal, cheese, and cakes.
Here is a pigeon so finely roasted it cries, Come eat me.
Sutton for mutton, Tamworth for beef, Walsall for bandy legs, and
Brummagem for a thief
[another personal favourite, but from the nineteenth century].

One also finds a few anti-recommendations:

> The devil will not come into Cornwall, for fear of being put into a pie.
> [which I read as implying that any old rubbish goes into a Cornish pasty].

Let us look next at the great staples of the diets of many nations: bread and meat; ale and wine. What we find in historical English proverbs is in fact a different grouping: bread and ale, meat and wine. The proverbs of familiarity and food-love, relishing and savouring, are the proverbs of bread and ale. The proverbs of meat and wine often have a tenor of suspicion and distrust. The *Académie Platine* was surprised by the spirit of *méfiance* towards meat and wine, and it was necessary to provide some historical background.

In endeavouring to do this with a flourish, I proposed the following thesis: that the English have, to this day, not fully overcome the trauma of defeat and occupation in 1066 by the French-speaking Normans. I cannot re-run the whole argument in the present paper, but it traced the traumatic impact of the triumph of Guillaume le Bâtard in 1066, from the savage brutality of the occupation in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries to the class-based manifestations in our society today (the very French contents of *Burke's Peerage*; the wealth of the Grosvenors – descended from the *Gros Veneur* who was the huntsman of Guillaume le Bâtard; how we philosophize in words of Norman origin and curse in words of Anglo-Saxon origin; even the attitudes epitomized by the proletarian 'Hop Off You Frogs' *Sun* newspaper). As regards meat, the thesis emphasized that all our names for the meat of sizeable animals (beef, mutton, veal, pork, venison) are Norman/French words while the names for the animals themselves (cow, sheep, calf, pig, deer) are Anglo-Saxon words. The English may have reared and herded the animals, but it was the Normans who controlled the eating of them. In other words, in the period when the proverbs began to emerge, the finer forms of meat were foreign to the tables of the common people.

My thesis was that this contributed to the tone of resentment and caution in many of the meat-proverbs. The keynote is established by this stark piece of alliteration:

> Much meat, much malady [recorded 1597, 1603, 1619, 1629, 1647, 1670].

We were able to confirm that no equivalent historical proverb exists in French or in Spanish. There is a more specific warning in the next proverb, found in several sources between 1588 and 1678:

> Raw veal and chickens make fat churchyards.

The lip-smacking proverb about roast pigeon (used metaphorically for any luscious temptation) is rare, in that English has few meat proverbs whose message is 'yum yum'. The three principal categories, in fact, are proverbs warning about excess; proverbs about how to eat meat; and proverbs about the scarcity of meat. Here is a selection, divided into those three groups:

> Mutton is meat for a glutton.
> More die by food than famine.
> One man's meat is another man's poison.
> One shoulder of mutton draws down another.
> Those that have much meat must have much sleep.

> After meat, mustard.
> The nearer the bone, the sweeter the flesh.
> Sweet meat will have sour sauce.
> In a shoulder of veal there are twenty and two good bits.
> Such beef, such broth.
> No broth, no ball; no ball, no beef.
> Shoulder of mutton and English beer make the Flemings tarry here.

> Poor men seek meat for their stomach; rich men seek stomach for their meat.
> Whoso eats dry bread with pleasure needs no meat.
> A lord's siege and rural men's ordure be like savour for all their meat's pure.
> An egg is worth an ox to the poor.
> If thou hast not a capon, feed on an onion.
> When the shoulder of mutton is going, 'tis good to take a slice.
> All flesh is not venison.
> What they want in meat, let them take out in drink.
> A hungry man smells meat afar off.
> It is better to want meat than guests or company.
> The chicken is the country's but the city eats it.
> Better a mouse in the pot than no meat at all.

If the attitudes to meat in our proverbs are mixed, the view of wine (the archetypal Norman drink[10]) is still more reserved. Consider these examples:

> Wine is a turncoat – first a friend then an enemy.
> Counsels in wine seldom prosper.
> Wine and wealth change wise men's manners.
> Wine and wenches empty men's purses.
> Eat bread at pleasure, drink wine by measure.
> The vine brings forth three grapes: the first of pleasure,
> the second of drunkenness, the third of sorrow.

And the defiant conclusion is summed up in one proverb:

> Good ale is wine's equal [first recorded 1598].

The contrast between the wine-proverbs and the ale-proverbs could not be stronger. The affection for good English ale shines through in proverb after proverb.[11] There is no

mistaking the warmth of this next example, which was formerly seen etched into pub windows, especially in my native Midlands:

> Thou brew'st good ale, blessings of thy heart [first recorded 1530].

Another fond proverb emphasizes that ale was seen as a food (an attitude that survives today perhaps only with Irish stout):

> Good ale is meat, drink and cloth [recorded 1602, 1612, 1670, 1738].

Favourite examples, still with a warm glow to them, further include 'Ale would make a cat speak' and 'Cobblers and tinkers: the best ale-drinkers', and above all this archetypal saying:

> He that buys land buys many stones; he that buys flesh buys many bones;
> he that buys eggs buys many shells; but he that buys good ale buys
> nothing else [first recorded 1595].

The food which attracts this sort of affection, and even veneration, alongside ale and above all others in the English proverbs is bread. Proverbs that refer to the 'staff of life' are well known to this day, but the proverb that sums up the message is this one:

> The best smell is bread, the best savour salt, the best love that of children
> [recorded 1578 and 1640].

I shall mention a proverb of drunkenness, dating back to 1500, which delighted the *Académie Platine*:

> To bake one's bread in a tankard.

And for my final example here is an obscure but charming proverb:

> New beer, new bread and green wood, will make a man's hair grow
> through his hood [recorded, as an old proverb, 1750].

In the English affection for bread and ale, I believe that the proverbs transport us back and provide a true historical insight into everyday life and feelings in centuries long ago.

The outcome of the research on English proverbs came to rather different conclusions from the much more culinary content that the Vincennes group found and enjoyed in the proverbs of France, Spain, and Italy, but nonetheless provided an enriching new angle on the language of food. In many of the individual proverbs, and in the whole canon of the proverbs, you do hear an authentic commentary (with a sense of humour) on English folk and their collective stomach.

Notes

1. The building of Vincennes had been hurriedly completed in November 1968. Widely reported in 1980 (numerous Internet sources) were the words of Alice Saunier-Seïté, the right-wing Secretary of State for the Universities: 'De quoi se plaignent-ils? Leurs nouveaux bâtiments seront situés entre la rue de la Liberté, l'avenue Lénine et l'avenue Stalingrad, et [à Saint-Denis] ils sont chez les communistes.'
2. Jean-Louis Flandrin (1931–2001) studied in Algiers and Paris before receiving the *agrégation* in History in 1956. He then taught at *lycées* in Algeria before returning to Paris, where he was one of the founders of Paris-VIII-Vincennes in 1968. He received his *doctorat d'état* from the Sorbonne in 1979. After his death in 2001, his personal papers, consisting of 184 archival boxes, were donated to the Archives Nationales in Paris by his widow, Maria Flandrin.
3. Platine, 'Des vins et des couleurs,' *L'Histoire* 2 (juin 1978), 96–98.
4. Platine, 'Chambré ou frappé: comment faut-il boire le vin?' *L'Histoire* 17 (novembre 1979): 94–95.
5. Flandrin, Jean-Louis, *Chronique de Platine: pour une gastronomie historique*, Paris: Editions Odile Jacob, 1992. [Collection of articles first published in *L'Histoire*, re-arranged and re-titled, but not, as far as I can tell, re-written.]
6. Flandrin, Jean-Louis, 'Pour une histoire du goût,' *L'Histoire* 85 (janvier 1986): 12–19.
7. The three most historically reliable sources. *Oxford dictionary of English proverbs* (2nd, 3rd and 4th editions – 4th edition available online at www.oxfordreference.com); Tilley, M.P., *A dictionary of the proverbs in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: a collection of proverbs found in English literature and the dictionaries of the period.*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950; Whiting, B.J., *Proverbs, sentences and proverbial phrases, from English writings mainly before 1500*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1968.
8. A proverb about extreme poverty: using hog's dung to wash clothing and dried cow dung as fuel.
9. Cf. *Chronique de Platine*, pp. 237–253; Flandrin, Jean-Louis, 'Et le beurre… conquit la France,' *L'Histoire* 85 (janvier 1986): 108–111.
10. Cf. Philippa Pullar, *Consuming passions: a history of English food and appetite*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970, p. 111, for a contrasting of ale-drinking Anglo-Saxons and wine-drinking Normans.
11. Cf. Sutton, David C., 'Historia de las ales inglesas,' conferencia en el programa del curso *La cerveza y su mundo*, Universidad Pablo de Olavide, Carmona, septiembre 2007 [re-writing of a paper given at Vincennes, 1979].