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**ITALIAN FOOD TERMS AND THEIR COLLOCATIONS IN AMERICA.
A CORPUS-BASED, CULTURAL AND LEXICOLOGICAL
PERSPECTIVE**

ABSTRACT. America has been in love with Italian food since it first arrived on its shores at the end of the 19th century during the first migration wave. Since then, a process of culinary but also linguistic hybridization has transformed Italian traditional recipes made in the US and has given origin to new English phrases involving Italian food terms, often outside the *cusine* boundaries. The present work sets out to investigate the cultural, culinary and, above all, terminological development of Italian food and its linguistic labels in America through analysis of collocations extracted from two large American English corpora.

KEYWORDS: Italian food terms. Loanwords. Collocations. Food.

Introduction

Food is at the heart of life. Not only does it contribute to our physical well-being and health but it also plays a major role in our emotional dimension. We link some of our earliest memories to food and commensality. It is food that we often turn to when in need of psychological comfort, and it is through the recipes that we have grown up with that we delineate parts of the self. Food is indeed more than nourishment for our cells, it feeds us at a deeper level.

Being so vastly pervasive, food is simultaneously cultural expression and heritage. It is through the process of eating that humans turn natural products into cultural output through cooking practices (Meigs 1997). Food is living memory that connects us back to our past, and forwards to our future by projecting an enduring sense of identity. This very ability to preserve identity, at both the personal and community levels, makes food a cultural anchor amid migratory waves. Indeed, the preparation of traditional recipes provides the palate with a taste of home and the spirit with memories to feed upon. Yet «it is precisely in the context of migration that food acts most crucially as a link between cultures» (Ciribuco 2019: 3), enabling a process of hybridization that gives rise to new cultural products.

When migrants settle in a new country, language too undergoes a process of hybridization as foreign food terms are often incorporated as loan words in the receiving language. The relationship between food and language is so strong that Lévi-Strauss (1966) equates the cuisine of a society to a language, whose analysis can bring social structures into view. The presence of numerous food-related borrowings in the English language (e.g. *banana*, *hummous*, *pizza*, *chocolate*, *paprika* etc.) is a testimony to a rich history of cultural and social fusion. Once these words enter the language, they become such an integral part

of its vocabulary that they often migrate from the kitchen to other domains of life. Their use in formulaic expressions is particularly interesting as it implies that the word is so fully integrated that it is no longer perceived as foreign.

Italian immigration in America began towards the end of the 19th century and «Italian was the first major foreign cuisine to find widespread acceptance among native-born Americans» (Levenstein 1985: 2), even though Italian communities went through an initially isolated phase. As Italian restaurants started to populate American streets, Italian food, and its vocabulary, spread.

The present work sets out to investigate the cultural, culinary and, above all, terminological development of Italian food and its terms in America. By extracting collocations (Firth 1957, Sinclair 1991) from the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), we aim in particular to gain insight into the process of cultural and linguistic hybridization.

Italian food and cuisine in America

In the Corpus of Historical American English, the first occurrence of the combination *Italian food* appeared in 1921. The expression is found in a cookery book, *The Chemistry of Breadmaking* by James Grant (1921):

«Tr. durum [Ed. *Triticum Durum*] or hard wheat is largely grown in Italy owing to the quantity of gluten it contains (approximately 17.0 per cent) and its suitability for making macaroni, a favourite Italian food»

It would seem that, in 1921, Italian pasta had not yet become popular, so much so that the term *macaroni* needed defining. In fact, in the 1920s middle-class Americans had only very recently begun to acknowledge and appreciate the taste of Italian cuisine (McLean & Janni 2002).

It took approximately a decade for palates to become fully acquainted with Italian flavours and recipes. Indeed, in 1930 Italian food was referenced in the novel *Years of Grace*, by Margaret Ayer Barnes: «“Where are we going?” he asked. “Tony’s? I thought so,” said Agnes. Then, turning to Jane, “Or do you hate Italian food?”». The question ‘do you hate Italian food?’ presupposes having tasted Italian food. It seems clear from this excerpt that, within 10 years or so, Italian food had become an established reality in the United States and Italian restaurants had begun to appear. Italian food was so popular that an individual’s sentiment about it was taken for granted.

America fell in love with the taste, simplicity, and high-quality ingredients of Italian recipes (Camillo *et al.* 2010), a fact confirmed by corpus data. In the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), the most frequent collocates of the bigram *Italian food* are (in order of decreasing frequency):

authentic, good, love, great, simple, wonderful, finest, passion, excellent, soulful, delicious. Such collocates demonstrate that Italian food has been, and still is, highly appreciated in America. In fact, *Italian* is the third collocate (97 occurrences) of the term *cuisine* in the COCA, only preceded by *French* (157 occurrences) and *American* (145 occurrences). As for its first appearance in the COHA, it is relatively recent, dating back to 1970. It appears for the first time in *The working mother's guide*, a book that addresses an emerging issue in the 1970s: working mothers. The publication provides practical advice for women who struggle to reconcile the roles of mother and worker:

«Learning to cook has great appeal for children, both boys and girls. They will respond enthusiastically to the idea of learning a bit of French cooking, or perhaps the Italian or Chinese cuisines. Slicing celery diagonally for a Chinese dish is a matter of curiosity to a child. How and why did the Chinese decide to slice vegetables that way? How is it that pasta is the basis for so much of the Italian cuisine? Why do the French enjoy wine in their dishes? Most children are entranced with the sounds of words and the names of dishes and why things are the way they are.»

This excerpt shows that, by the 1970s, Italian cuisine had been so successfully incorporated into the American lifestyle that it was not only common for Americans to dine at Italian restaurants but also natural to cook Italian dishes at home. Indeed, a 2000 survey on the spread of Italian, Mexican, and Chinese cuisines in America carried out by the National Restaurant

Association confirmed that, almost 20 years later, more than nine out of 10 consumers are familiar with and have tried these foods, and about half maintain they eat them frequently (Hensley 2000).

Brought to American shores by Italian immigrants (especially from the South), Italian cuisine underwent a process of adaptation throughout the years. On the one hand, Americans developed a palate for certain flavours therefore adapting foreign recipes accordingly, on the other, lack of traditional Italian ingredients, such as fresh basil, prosciutto, balsamic vinegar, and hard cheeses, made some substitution necessary. Indeed, in a 1991 interview retrievable from the COCA, the owner of Al Forno, an Italian restaurant in Providence Rhode Island, claims: «We find we can serve a ‘more authentic’ Italian cuisine than was possible in the past simply because more typical ingredients are available». And authenticity is indeed one prerequisite for the success of Italian cuisine as well as being one of the terms to which the bigram is more often associated with, only preceded by *northern* and *regional*.

Tradition, reinterpretation, and lexical assimilation

Whenever traditional recipes leave their country of origin, they undergo a process of adaptation to the established style and taste of the receiving country.

This process takes years and probably never comes to an end as new variations keep emerging from traditional dishes until their origins are no longer traceable. When Italian culinary practices arrived in America during the first migratory wave, Italian recipes remained faithful to their roots, as Italians would form very isolated communities whose members tended to stick together. Despite several attempts by reformers and social workers to ‘Americanize’ the Italian way of cooking, Italian immigrants stubbornly clung to their habits and fiercely resisted any form of contamination, so much so that they would come across as very sensitive (Levenstein 1985).

Yet when the cuisine became disseminated beyond the small and isolated communities that dwelled in the Eastern suburbs to meet with the American lifestyle on a large scale, it gradually parted from the tradition. And once recipes became deeply ingrained in the culture, new culinary adaptations as well as new lexical usages of Italian food terms began to appear.

One of the dishes whose mode of consumption has departed from the Italian tradition is tortellini. The term has several collocates in the COCA, amongst which are *cheese, package, refrigerated*. To an Italian eye, however, the occurrence of three particular nouns cannot go unnoticed. They are *tapas, salad, and skewers*. Tortellini tapas is an award-winning recipe presented in a

1998 magazine called *Southern Living*. It consists of tortellini covered in ranch-style dressing, breadcrumbs, and eggs. A dish ideally served warm on Italian shores, tortellini can apparently be enjoyed cold when mixed with fresh tomatoes, peppers, and mozzarella cheese in a refreshing tortellini salad. Finally, rather than serving it on a plate, tortellini can be threaded onto skewers together with basil leaves and tomatoes.

The term *penne* made its first appearance in the COHA in 1861. Yet none of the occurrences make reference to pasta, as they all refer to a man named George Penne. For the term to be used in its culinary acceptance, we must wait until 1988, when it appears in the *New York Times* in a restaurant review. As is the case with tortellini, penne can also be served in creative ways. Among the available recipes for pasta sauce is an interesting flavour concoction of low-fat mayonnaise, tandoori spice mix, mango chutney, fruit juice, Edam cheese, raw spinach leaves, and spring onions. Aside from such an outlandish culinary spur, the main collocates of the noun *penne* in the COCA are *tomato*, *vodka*, *shrimp*, and *chicken*. *Penne alla vodka* is a recipe that Italians are familiar with, despite its not being traditional. In fact, the dish used to be popular in the 1980s but gradually fell out of favour. Conversely, in America, whilst the first occurrence

was registered in the COCA in 1990, the recipe seems to rise to fame between 2010 and 2014, as the number of occurrences has increased.

Another kind of pasta that is very well known abroad – in fact, perhaps the most well-known – is spaghetti, whose use has been increasing steadily since its first appearance in 1883. The noun can be retrieved from the COHA as early as 1883 in a book entitled *The Easiest Way in Housekeeping and Cooking Adapted to Domestic Use or Study in Classes*, a collection of tips for housewives that includes a selection of recipes:

«ITALIA'S PRIDE. This is a favorite dish in the writer's family, having been sent many years ago from Italy by a friend who had learned its composition from her Italian cook. Its name was bestowed by the children of the house. One large cup of chopped meat; two onions minced and fried brown in butter; a pint of cold boiled macaroni or *spaghetti*; a pint of fresh or cold stewed tomatoes; one teaspoonful of salt; half a teaspoonful of white pepper. Butter a pudding dish, and put first a layer of macaroni, then tomato, then meat and some onion and seasoning, continuing this till the dish is full. Cover with fine bread crumbs, dot with bits of butter, and bake for half an hour. Serve very hot.»

It must be noted that *Italia's Pride* is a recipe that arrived to America through an American citizen (i.e. a friend of the author) who encountered it during a trip to Italy, not one introduced by Italian immigrants. This does not come as a surprise given that the largest migratory wave started towards the end of the 19th century. Looking at the ingredients and directions, *Italia's Pride* is in

fact *pasta al forno*, but the Italian label cannot be found in the COHA. It comes up only once in the COCA in a 2000 magazine, *Vegetarian times*, in which it is accompanied by its English translation, i.e. *from the oven*, a sign that the recipe was not popular enough to assume that the average reader would be familiar with it.

The term *spaghetti* shows up in another text a few years later, in 1903:

«Each of our great towns has its “Little Italy”, with shops where nothing is spoken but Italian and streets in which the alien pedestrian had better not linger after nightfall. The chief industry of these exotic communities seems to be spaghetti and stilettos.»

Apart from the culinary term *spaghetti*, what is relevant in this excerpt is reference to the Italian neighbourhood Little Italy, against which Americans are warned because of its nocturnal danger. Indeed, in the COHA, amongst the collocates of the bigram *Little Italy*, are the terms *slums*, *shot*, *terrorized*, and *mafioso*. It is also interesting to note that, in the above passage, the Italian community is described as *exotic*, whilst the odd American visitor is an *alien*, especially given that the only spoken language in such a district is indeed Italian.

If we extract the collocations centring around the noun *spaghetti* by frequency, the first words that come up are *meatballs*, *dinner*, *plate*, *eat*, *macaroni*, *meat*, *cook*, and *bowl*. From a culinary point of view, the phrase

spaghetti chicken will surely catch an Italian eye, as the combination of chicken and spaghetti is not very traditional. Even *spaghetti Bolognese*, one of the most popular, supposedly Italian, dishes in the English-speaking world, is somewhat of a culinary reinterpretation as, whilst both ragù and spaghetti are traditional Italian ingredients, Italians prefer to serve ragù on short-cut and/or thick pasta. *Squash* is the third most frequent nominal collocate of *spaghetti*, yet this has nothing to do with recipes. *Spaghetti squash* is indeed a type of squash characterized by a rather stringy, spaghetti-like pulp.

Whilst the vast majority of collocations involving the noun *spaghetti* are all related to the culinary domain, there are a few that stand out since they do not belong in this semantic area. This is the case, for example, with the noun *straps*. *Spaghetti strap* is a thin shoulder strap on an item of women's clothing, so-named for its resemblance to thin pasta strings. Its first registered occurrence in the COHA is in 1981: «The dress, tightly fitted, was a bottle-green silk so dark it was almost black. It shimmered, and was skimpy as a slip, suspended from her smooth shoulders by spaghetti straps». Albeit appearing some time after the spread of *spaghetti* in America, by becoming a label referencing another object, the association between *spaghetti* and *strap* became so strong that the noun *strap* is now the sixth most frequent collocate of the noun *spaghetti*. Another

expression that exploits a similar property is *spaghetti shag*, a rug made of thin, spaghetti-like hair.

Whilst the film genre Spaghetti Western emerged in the mid-1960s, the first account of such a word combination in the COHA dates back 1981. It appears in the play *Escape Entertainment* by Carol Bolt in a scene in which the characters Hayes and Potter bicker and one accuses the other of hiring an actor: «who's been getting fat making spaghetti westerns». Evidently, the choice of the term *spaghetti* to identify a kind of film that was usually made by Italian companies and shot in Spain means that spaghetti was somehow the most representative concept of *italianness* in the 1960s. Indeed, food is widely felt to be the emblem of Italians and, among the wide range of food items that have been exported worldwide, spaghetti is the most representative in the collective imagination. Its popularity accounts for the fact that it can be found in a large number of different English collocational patterns. Indeed, if spaghetti was chosen as a proxy for its origin, there are other properties connected to the term that have been exploited linguistically to create new word combinations.

In the COCA we come across the expression *spaghetti junction*, which is used to describe a complex road traffic interchange. Although the term originated in the United Kingdom in the 1960s, the first occurrence in the

COCA is to be found in 1990 in a *Washington Post* article entitled *Driving us crazy*. The article explores the issue of traffic and commuter stress and informs the reader that an Atlanta psychologist treats traffic phobia: «in a course aimed at making you able to drive through Spaghetti Junction northeast of town, where an eight-lane highway meets a 12-lane highway». The choice of the modifier *spaghetti* to describe such intricate interchanges is linked to one of the properties of spaghetti, i.e. it is tangled.

The physical property of intricacy can take on a metaphorical extension too, indicating the difficulty of making sense of something. This occurs in the combination *spaghetti code*, a negative way of describing an unintelligible computer programming script developed by someone lacking programming style rules, ability, or experience. In the COCA there is only one occurrence of such a collocation, which can be accounted for by it pertaining to a specialized domain (i.e. IT). The property of tangling is at the base of yet another collocation, *spaghetti wiring*. The phrase can be found in the science fiction book *Wrench and Claw*, an adventure story published in 1998 exploring high technology and ancient civilizations. The combination is employed to describe the inside of a panel as the author claims that: «the wad of spaghetti wiring inside looked horrible» (1998: 58). Like *spaghetti code*, *spaghetti wiring* too has

a negative connotation, in this case magnified by the use of the adjective *horrible*. An alternative to *spaghetti wiring* is *cable spaghetti*, which has a compatible meaning. The difference between the two expressions seems to be merely syntactic in nature; in the former, *spaghetti* is a modifier of *wiring*, the head of the noun phrase, whilst in the latter *spaghetti* becomes the head of the phrase. Out of the two, *spaghetti wiring* seems to be the preferred locution. A third variant of the same expression is *spaghetti maze*, appearing in 2000 in an article about the advantages of Bluetooth technology over cable technology.

Aside from becoming tangled, other properties of spaghetti are exploited to form word combinations. For example, the features of thinness and/or fragility are at the core of the recently-formed expression *spaghetti arms*. The combination appeared for the first time in the spoken section of the COCA in 2011. In a television show aired on ABC Primetime, a parent addresses his child who has taken his shirt off at the beach: «You're out of shape and you take your shirt off? You got spaghetti arms». The term *spaghetti arms* is clearly used in a disparaging fashion and underlines the child's slender build. In a 2017 excerpt from *Bleacher Report*, a sports magazine, *spaghetti arms* is accompanied by the expression *spaghetti legs*: «At just 210 pounds with spaghetti arms and legs,

expect strength development to become a routine talking point when analyzing Bamba's future potential».

The first occurrence of *spaghetti legs* dates back to 1993 and is to be found in the poem *Slumber Party* by Jesse Lee Kercheval. The poet describes an old friend as a «bundle of bones, old spaghetti legs», thus indicating their frailty. If we turn to Google N-gram viewer, we learn that the expression *spaghetti legs* dates from 1933, and is found in a book entitled *School Arts*. Yet, on closer inspection, since the author is providing ideas to enable children to make art using food, he employs the locution *spaghetti legs* literally rather than figuratively. In the COHA, the same combination is found in 1975 in a *Sports Illustrated* article in which the author informs the readership that Bolding, the interviewed runner, «developed a bad case of spaghetti legs» during an 800-metre final.

A further negative use of the modifier *spaghetti* can be identified in the collocation *spaghetti journalism*. The expression makes reference to the act of throwing spaghetti at a wall hoping that some will stick. Spaghetti is thus a metaphor for poor journalistic claims whose likelihood of sticking with the public depends primarily upon quantity rather than quality; the greater the number of claims that are made, the more likely some of them will take root.

Amongst the collocations extracted by mutual information from the COCA, we come across the interesting *spaghetti monster*. The expression is part of the longer locution *flying spaghetti monster*, a phrase that identifies a movement emerged in 2005 opposing the teaching of intelligent design and creationism in public schools. The supernatural creator has the shape of spaghetti and meatballs and the cult itself is also known as Pastafarianism, a portmanteau word based on the terms *pasta* and *Rastafarianism*.

In the academic section of the COCA, the combination *spaghetti process* comes up in a 1995 article about soil cleaning. *Spaghetti process* is defined as: «a technology used by civil engineers to dewater earthen dams and roadbeds» (Valenti 1995: 50). Albeit having originated in the field of mechanical engineering, later on the same collocation was adopted by computer scientists, thus acquiring a new meaning. Indeed, a 2011 research paper reads: «This invited keynote paper demonstrates that process mining can be used to discover a wide range of processes ranging from structured processes (Lasagna processes) to unstructured processes (Spaghetti processes)» (Van der Aalst 2011: 1). Typically encountered in product development, service, resource management, and sales, the main distinguishing feature of *spaghetti processes* is the difficulty with which it is interpreted and understood by humans, owing to

multitude and intricacy. At the opposite end of the semantic scale are *lasagna processes*. The modifier *lasagna* was chosen since it embodies structure and order, the exact opposite of the chaotic shape of spaghetti. Orderly layering is also at the core of two other related combinations that appear in the COCA, *lasagna garden* and *lasagna technique*, both referring to making garden beds with fallen leaves, straw, or hay.

Another interesting case of an Italian food word employed in a technical domain is *cannelloni*. The term can be found in a 2011 research paper entitled «A case for a SING-type cannelloni target at the ESS power level». In the article the authors make reference to zirconium tubes filled with lead and label them *cannelloni* on the grounds of resemblance.

From analysis of the nominal collocates extracted from the COCA, it appears that, on American tables, salami is best consumed with cheese, in a sandwich or on crackers. But the term appears in other interesting non-culinary-related lexical contexts. Among the first collocates the noun *tactic* appears. The combination *salami tactic* is first attested to in 1952 in the COHA in a *Time* article about the Hungarian leader Mátyás Rákosi. Indeed, the phrase originated in Hungary as Rákosi, in an attempt to destroy the non-Communist parties, demanded: «a little more each day, like cutting up a salami, thin slice after thin

slice» (1952). The expression clearly refers to a way of carrying out a plan by means of a series of small or imperceptible steps. In light of its meaning, *salami tactic* has also come to identify a type of computer fraud in which small amounts of money are transferred from numerous customer accounts into an account held under a false name: «Salami is a truly automated crime. It's taking small slices over a period of time. It's taking very small amounts of money from very large numbers of accounts, say in a bank savings system, and transferring them automatically into a favored account» (from *American Banker*, 11 April 1979)

The same idea is exploited in information security; a *salami attack* identifies a series of minor undetected attacks that together result in a larger more serious attack. But the concept of portioning is found in another combination involving the noun *salami* - *salami science*. The expression is reported in the COCA in a 1991 magazine article that reads: «The idea is to discourage “salami science”, the practice of breaking research into the lowest publishable units». If we turn to Google N-gram viewer, we observe a dramatic increase in the use of this phrase between 1973 (i.e. its first appearance) and 2000. In 1985 the expression was used in an article entitled: «Fraud squad moves in on universities». The article reports on the annual meeting of the

American Association for the Advancement of Science. On that occasion, it was indicated that pressure to publish was steadily increasing, therefore juggling of results was to become more likely. *Salami science* was mentioned as one of the lesser offences and was defined as: «fragmented publication when one idea became several papers» (1985: 8).

We come across one last interesting occurrence of *salami* in the COCA employed in a non-culinary context. This is found in an interview with Stephen King in which the writer discusses his writing style: «I don't take notes; I don't outline, I don't do anything like that. I just flail away at the goddamn thing. I'm a salami writer. I try to write good salami, but salami is salami. You can't sell it as caviar». Although *salami writer* is not a habitual collocation in English, it is interesting to note how the choice of the term *salami* was not motivated by the property of being sliceable, as was the case in all previous examples. King utilizes the term as indicating something good, genuine yet modest and unpretentious.

Conclusion

Food and language are vital parts of a people's identity. This is especially true in the case of migration waves, during which traditional recipes and dialects

are used to establish invisible yet meaningful connections with the country of origin.

Historically, Italians have always been very particular about their food. However, once Italian recipes arrived in the US the geographical distance between them and their country of origin freed them from traditional practices. Thus, traditional dishes became a new canvas on which Americans imparted their own style, at times in rather eclectic ways and often to the disappointment of purists. As can be seen from analysis of the nominal collocates of some Italian ingredients, most recipes have been decontextualized and recontextualized in different fashions, bringing forth deviations from the rigid Italian culinary norm. Some variants have become so successful that they have outperformed the original dishes in terms of popularity. Such is the case of spaghetti Bolognese, a recipe that enjoys greater popularity in America than it does in Italy.

The same creative processes of decontextualization and recontextualization can be observed in the lexicon. Words that originally denoted food items and were used only in the kitchen developed meaning extensions that emerged out of the company these words kept with those they came to modify. Collocational patterns centring upon Italian food terms can reveal which semantic traits have

been exploited by the linguistic community in order to create new word combinations. The majority of traits are based on the physical properties of Italian food items. For instance, in the case of spaghetti, the most exploited features are its thinness, brittleness, intricacy, and stickiness. The same properties can also be used metaphorically, as is the case with spaghetti journalism. Most word combinations involving the term spaghetti have a negative connotation. This does not come as a surprise given that the properties that give rise to collocations have a negative connotation themselves. At other times, however, the connotation is neutral. Lasagna process, for example, is simply based on the property of being layered, with neither positive nor negative values associated to it. Interestingly, many Italian food items have ended up being utilized in specialized domains, from Information Technology to engineering.

As can be observed by looking at the distribution of linguistic data in the corpora through time, even though Americans became acquainted with Italian food more than a century ago, the creative process is ongoing, both in the language and at the dinner table.

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