The perception of food by consumers: The discourse analysis perspective

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SUMMARY
The question of how ordinary consumers perceive food matters may be dealt with owing to discourse analysis and argumentation studies. We hypothesize that accounting for the various discursive or linguistic devices used by ordinary people when talking about food may highlight the perception they have of such matters. We illustrate this point with the description of excerpts from various “ordinary” discourses that have been objectified through a detailed transcription in order to permit their systematic analysis.

Keywords
discourse analysis, argumentation studies, representations, evaluation, analogy.
1 – TWO THEORETICAL APPROACHES: DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND ARGUMENTATION ANALYSIS

1.1 Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis focuses on the way speakers use the linguistic code in relation to some specific situations of communication.

In such a perspective, the linguistic descriptions are related to external (sociological, psychological...) parameters in order to put to the fore significant phenomena — for instance, the way speakers present themselves and their talk as legitimate through lexical choices, the selection of a discursive genre, etc.

1.2 Argumentation theory

The analysis of argumentation (PLANTIN 1990, VAN EEMEREN et al. 1987) may be seen either as complementary with or as being a part of discourse analysis. It constitutes a fruitful approach of situations characterized by the confrontation of divergent discourses; in such situations, it aims at accounting for the way speakers elaborate a claim and some arguments to support it in order to make it more resistant to contest. Symmetrically it also investigates the way speakers contest the adversary’s claim and arguments.

2 – THE DATA

Discourse analysis and argumentation analysis both correspond to empirical approaches based on data observation — more specifically, the observation of discourses that have been objectified through a detailed transcription in order to permit their systematic analysis.

In order to highlight the way consumers — or a part of them — perceive food matters, different approaches are possible:

- Observing “natural” data, that is, data which exist independently from the observation process. The main difficulty of such an approach is to identify in what circumstances discourses about food might arise. For instance, a discussion during lunchtime (at home or at restaurant) or the discursive exchanges between customers and seller in food stores, once registered and transcribed, may constitute interesting data for argumentation or discourse analysis.

- Focusing on discourses that occur for the analysis purpose: the method then meets the classical technique of interview, and obey protocols that are more or less constraining (in regard to length, themes...).
The exploratory corpus we collected gathers discourses produced in very contrasting situations:

- Interviews made in various public places (doctors and dentists’ waiting rooms, newsagents, health-food shops) [corpus E];
- Debates at the request of a field worker but without his or her active participation, in a newsagent’s shop [corpus D];
- Discussions between ordinary passers-by and militant members of an association organizing anti-GMO actions [corpus M];
- A set of interviews turning on the GMOs question collected by Suzanne de Cheveigné for the Eurobarometer program;
- Dialogues between experts and a sample group of French citizens during the Conference of Consensus about GMOs [Paris, June 1998];
- Leaflets from health-food shops (such data contrast with the preceding ones because they are written, and because of their commercial nature).

These discourses were registered and then transcribed in order to make it possible for the analyst to manipulate a stabilized object. Each corpus was collected in order to answer some specific research questioning; but the final heterogeneous corpus also permits transversal observations.

NB: The data include neither advertising messages, nor public campaigns about food and nutrition. This paper mostly looks at the consumers’ discourses about such matters rather than at the discourses they are addressed (e.g., commercial or institutional messages); but the analysis presented here should also apply de jure to such data.

3 – ANALYSIS CATEGORIES AND ELEMENTS OF RESULTS

Discourse analysis and argumentation analysis, as defined here, contrast with the content analysis often used in many quantitative studies (see GASKELL et al. 2001, for instance) because of the kind of data they try to account for (the data we observe are various whereas classical content analysis usually favours interview data) and because of the kind of analysis that is proceeded. Like content analysis based on a lexicometrical treatment of data, discourse analysis can extract the content of discourse through the identification of the main themes that are dealt with. Moreover, it highlights the way such themes are treated by speakers by appealing to specific linguistic or argumentative categories.

Such categories may be:

3.1 Evaluative discourse

Analysing the way speakers positively or negatively value specific elements of discourse, through the identification of the axiological lexical items;
NB: In any language, some words may be qualified as “neutral”, “factual”, whereas some others are evaluative or axiological; such a distinction permits to characterize, from a linguistic point of view, the opposition between the sentence “he’s a teacher” and the sentence “he’s a fool”, for instance. An axiological item has two semantic levels:

- description of the denotation (what is referred to);
- positive or negative evaluation of the denotation.

The study of axiological items enables the analyst to observe speakers’ attitudes towards a specific subject. Such attitudes can also be identified through other subjectivity linguistic markers (KERBRAT-ORECCHIONI, 1980), but we will not go further into such markers description in this paper.

In order to illustrate the evaluative dimension of discourse, let us consider now the nature/artifice opposition which structures many ordinary discourses on food. Such a factual opposition is also characterized axiologically, the “natural” side being most often positively valued whereas the “artificial” side is discredited.

Such a contrast between a benevolent nature and a nasty artificial proceeding of this nature often reveals a conception of nature that is unquestioned, spontaneous, and that belongs to speakers’ shared evidence store. It often echoes other oppositions that are also axiologically determined, such as the opposition between “the good old days”, a chimerical golden age¹, and a disturbing present – or an even gloomier future.

The analysis of talk during the conference of consensus on GMOs [June 1998] displays such an oriented opposition between nature and artifice:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature</th>
<th>Artifice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Blés, plantes) sauvages</td>
<td>Produit modifié</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>wild (wheat, crop)</em></td>
<td><em>modified product</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Blés) primitifs</td>
<td>Poulet industriel / modifié / trafiqué</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>primitive (wheat)</em></td>
<td><em>factory farmed / modified / doctored chicken</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Plantes) spontanées</td>
<td>(Plantes) cultivées</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>spontaneous (crops)</em></td>
<td><em>cultivated (crops)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Produit) bio, sain</td>
<td>(Plantes, maïs, soja) transgénique(s), manipulé</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>organic, healthy (product)</em></td>
<td><em>transgenic, engineered (crops, corn, soya)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poulets Loué</td>
<td>Poulets artificiels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>quality labelled chicken</em></td>
<td><em>artificial chicken</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purée fraîche</td>
<td>Purée déshydratée</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>fresh mashed potatoes</em></td>
<td><em>dehydrated mashed potatoes</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produit nature</td>
<td>Produit transformé</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>natural product</em></td>
<td><em>transformed product</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aliment natif qui vient du sol directement</td>
<td>Aliment qui a été traité</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>native food that comes directly from the soil</em></td>
<td><em>modified food</em></td>
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</table>

¹. Whereas many studies show a spectacular decrease of the sanitary risks linked to food; see for instance Grosclaude, éd. 2001.
Some of the words which enter this opposition are clearly evaluative ("doc-
tored" applied to "chicken", for instance, or "healthy" applied to "product"). Some others are only indirectly positive or negative; for instance, the French adjective "manipulé" has a technical meaning (as in manipulation génétique, "genetic engineering"); but it also has the meaning of "rigging", "trying to deceive" (manipuler quelqu’un, une élection…), and this negative meaning is still present in such expressions as soja manipulé ("modified soya") in the con-
text of a discussion between non expert speakers.

Nevertheless, such a contrast between a positively valued ancient time con-
cerned with the preservation of nature, and a blamed present time which would betray this nature is not that clear-cut. The observation of other linguistic mar-
kers displays a simultaneous and partially contradictory positive evaluation of
modernity and specifically, of science and technology.

Such a paradox appears clearly in leaflets from heath-food stores vaunting
such or such non transformed foodstuff. According to the preceding description
of the oriented opposition between nature and artifice, what is qualified as
“natural”, “organic”, “genuine”, “alive” is positively valued, whereas factory-
engineered or “classical” products are negatively valued:

« Le grain de blé, naturel, non trafiqué génétiquement, est une mine de nutriments précieux » / « cette richesse naturelle » / « Le fait qu’il [l’acide phytique] disparaîsse au cours des transformations chimiques de la pâte qui lève, mèrite donc en faveur du
pain au levain. Mais au vrai levain. Pas un levain tout fait, obtenu au départ avec de
la levure. » / « la seule présence de levure chimique dans le local (…) suffit à entraver
les effets de la fermentation naturelle de la pâte. » / « les boulanger classiques »
vs « les boulanger bio » (Le vrai pain bio, Diet Infos 74).

The natural, non genetically modified wheat corn, is a mine of precious nutriments / this natural wealth / the fact that it [the phytic acid] disappears along with the chemical
transformations of the rising dough is an argument in favour of the leavened bread.
But with genuine leaven. Not a ready made leaven, originally issued from yeast. / the
very presence of chemical yeast in the premises (…) is enough for hampering the
effects of the natural fermentation of dough (Le vrai pain bio, Diet Infos 74).

« Traitées aux acides, aux phosphates, à la soude, chauffées à 240 °C, les huiles
“industrielles” augmentent le “mauvais” cholestérol et diminuent le “bon”. » / « Aux antipodes des procédés barbares utilisés dans la fabrication industrielle des
huiles, la première pression à froid des oléagineux respecte les vitamines et les
acides gras poly-insaturés, et permet d’obtenir des huiles non seulement vivantes,
mais non traitées chimiquement. » (L’huile vivante, Diet Infos 62).

Treated with acides, phosphates, soda, heated up to 240°, industrial oils increase
“bad” cholesterol and decrease “good” cholesterol. / At the opposite of the barbarous
processes used in the industrial production of oils, a cold first pressuring of oleagi-
nous plants safeguards vitamins and polyunsaturated fatty acids, and makes it possible
to produce oils that are alive, but also chemically non treated (L’huile vivante, Diet
Infos 62).

« Faut-il abandonner totalement le lait (…) ? (…) S’agissant du lait du commerce
classique, la réponse semble bien devoir être positive. (…) Par contre, il nous faut
revenir sur les qualités qui sont celles d’un véritable lait naturel, c’est-à-dire
biologique. » (Les laits végétaux, Diet Infos 72).

Should we stop consuming milk? (…) As far as milk from classical trade is concerned,
the answer seems to be "yes". (…) On the other hand, we must emphasize the quality
of genuine natural milk, that is, organic milk (Les laits végétaux, Diet Infos 72).

 Besides this positive orientation to nature, paradoxically, it may be noted that:
– such leaflets use many scientific or technical lexical items;
– they systematically mention titles such as “doctor” or “professor” of the personality who praises such or such organic foodstuff;
– they are often structured on the same pattern as medicines’ explanatory leaflets (quantitative composition, directions for use, dosage, warnings…);

Such discursive phenomena could reveal a positive attitude towards modern scientific rationality. This observation is in some regards contradictory with the systematic praising of nature and tradition that may be shown in the very same leaflets; it reveals a lack of consistence in the value system of such discourses about food (DOURY, 1998).

3.2 Ordinary ~ technical representations

The approach that is presented in this paper also enables the analyst to identify some aspects of ordinary representations of food. Such representations may appear for instance owing to the observation of explicating or rephrasing processes associated with some key-words as the acronym GMO (Genetically Modified Organism):

– Rephrasing sequences may be revealing of the connotations of a term for a given speaker. For instance, in the following example (from a discussion between a newsagent and a customer), “GMO” is paraphrased as “this american food”. Such a formula testifies for a representation of GMOs as a spreading phenomenon originating in the United States. This representation is probably negatively oriented because of the bad opinion French people usually have about American food.

(a newsagent to a usual client): N: What do you think about the GMOs, sincerely, this American food, what do you think about it?

[corpus D]

Furthermore, it echoes the antiglobalisation attitudes triggered off by pan-européan food scandals such as BSE (GRABNER et al.: 15).

More generally, spotting terms belonging to a specialized lexicon as well as their reformulations may be a way of identifying what remains of scientific knowledge in ordinary discourse. For instance, the acronym GMO (or its full formulation) is associated with defining sequences which may be evaluated according to their conformity to the “right” technical definition.

NB: In natural data as well as in discourses that occur for the analysis purpose, the emergence as well as the form of the definitions of technical terms depend very much on the representation that the interactants have of their mutual competences. In this respect, the presence of an inquirer may constitute an inhibitory parameter.

In the first example, the term “GMO” is explained through the evocation of the process through which GMOs (“genetically modified stuff”) are produced:

C: Well, they put genes that transform the plant into something else, it’s very simple

[corpus D]

whereas in the two following examples, GMOs are defined through the benefits that are expected from their use in farm-produce industry:
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C: I've no idea. I know that it works by er, transplanting new plants to allow them to... to grow without being... without being infested by insects. Maybe I'm talking rubbish.

Me: well in fact it's er... to make it clear it's er... it's some... if you want it's... if you... now there when you... when you want to create tomatoes that are more tasty

The predominance of such goal-oriented definitions of GMO attests that speakers do not feel at ease with the technical characteristics of such organisms. Furthermore, the observation of such definitions may enable the analyst to identify what people regard as the plausible positive or negative consequences of a technical innovation – which are known as a decisive parameter for its social acceptance (GRABNER et al. 2001, GASKELL et al. 2001, BOY et al. 2002).

3.3 Identification of diverse sources of information about food

Discourse analysis can also enable the identification of the different sources of information on which people rely in order to make up their mind about questions concerning food, such as the media, hearsay, science. Such sources of information can be spotted out through the analysis of various enunciative phenomena. To say it roughly, we try to answer the question “who’s speaking?” through the analysis of reported speech (“one says that...”, “I heard that...”).

The identification of different “voices” located in the informant’s discourses is associated with the analysis of the speaker’s attitudes vis-à-vis his sources. This analysis points out in particular the hedging (modalisation) allocated to the quotation of those external discourses – the distance that speakers place between them and those discourses, and the way they articulate these discourses with their own.

The external enunciative sources – the persons or institutions at the origin of discourse about food which are not from the informant himself – are referred to mostly by the personal pronoun “ils” (they) disconnected from any recognizable antecedent:

L1: y a encore des problèmes parce que y a certainement comme ils disent des farines animales qui étaient qui étaient qui étaient prévues
L2: stockées
L1: non non oui et puis qui étaient prévues pour les pour les porcins les choses comme ça et main et qui donnent en même temps aux vaches et puis c'est tout

[corpus E]

L1: there still are problems’ cause surely there still is as they call it meat meal that was that was meant to be
L2: stored
L1: no, no oh yes and then that was meant for pigs, and things like that and that now they give to cows as well and that’s that

but which can generally be linked to a mediatic source, as in the following example:
Well er now meat spread is concerned and er they said on the radio the other morning er we should just completely get rid of meat spread

The source of information can also been revealed by lexical choices such as the use of the verb “entendre” (to hear) in the following example; it still deals with meat spread and refers to a radio broadcast:

mais quand j’ai entendu bonne que alors ça se rapprochait alors bon Le Mans après ça se rapprochait donc à (inaudible) que ça se rapprochait de Bouvrais j’me suis dis ah : ça se rapproche

when I heard that it was getting closer you know Le Mans and then even closer to Bouvrais, I told myself

oh it’s getting closer

The external discourses are sometimes interwoven. Thus, in the following example, the speaker reports what a chemist-expert told somebody else; the chemist himself received his information from a source which he did not identify, yet he is at the origin of the transmission of the warning:

Josette elle va elle va au pharmacien pour chercher quelque chose on lui dit ben les coques il paraît qu’elles sont polluées cette a : euh euh s alors on a tout on a tout rejeté

Josette she went to the chemists to find something she was told well apparently the cockles are polluted this er: er so we threw everything away

This example emphasizes the fact, recurring in our data, that whenever a source of information is identified, it is always the one which is nearest to the speaker amongst the different relays on the chain of information (in this case, Josette, but neither the chemist nor the original source from which he derives his information).

The same observation can be made about this example:

bon le porc euh on n’en dit pas que du bien [1] euh les conséquences sur la charcuterie on peut à peine se rabattre sur le jambon et autres produits de charcuterie la volaille euh n’en :: parle pas surtout quand on voit euh le stress que subissent euh ces animaux euh au moment de l’abattage () on m’a raconté une émission l’autre soir [2] euh ils sont pendus par les pattes euh on leur coupe la tête tous ensemble euh euh bon ils sont éleves en quelques semaines euh alors est-ce que : même le les volailles euh :: [SOUPIR] élevées en liberté au grain sur l’étiquette euh :: elles sont parfaitement de confiance [SOUPIR]

well pork er we can’t say that [1] pork is beyond reproach either er the consequences on cooked meats, we can hardly fall back on eating ham and other cooked pork meat products er don’t even mention poultry, especially when you see the stress that these animals go through when they’re killed () someone told me about a program on TV last evening [2] er they’re hung by the feet they cut off their heads all together well well they grow to full size in a few weeks so er what [SIGH], even chikens raised free range with grain on the label can you trust them completely [SIGH]

The speaker’s suspicion towards some kind of food is justified by the reference to hearsay (on-dit). The origin of these quotations cannot be traced, but
they are presented in direct style [1] and as in a dialogue in which the speaker [2] recalls his friend’s discussion of media news.

If one pays attention to the way those external discourses are integrated to the speaker’s own talk, one finds out that the speaker distances himself from them. He presents these discourses as unreliable – as suggested by the adverb maintenant (now) in the example about pork meat spread (see above) or as in this one:

on se sent assez coincé (.) quant à au choix des aliments en particulier la viande euh le bœuf euh n’inspire pas confiance euh même le boucher même euh l’étiquetage euh origine France euh où a été élevé l’animal on apprend maintenant qu’il a pu naître en Italie euh engraisssé euh : en :: euh : en Belgique et vendu en France

The original discourses appear also sometimes contradictory, as in the example below where the speaker, after echoing the views about the dangers of modern food, moderates these views with this comment:

L1 : non mais à côté de ça ils t- (.) ils tiennent un discours où il dit qu’on vit plus longtemps :: (..) par rapport à avant quoi c’est-à-dire y a ça aussi (.) y a une contradiction à ce niveau-là quoi on te dit qu’on vit plus longtemps :: les gens se comportent beaucoup mieux :

Finally, the image of the speaker which comes out of the observation of these various reported speech sequences is one of somebody “bombarded” by discourses whose reliability it is impossible to evaluate. In the absence of any criteria for reliable evaluation the speaker could either distrust all food in general or give up any precaution.

This suspicion about the sources of mediatic and/or scientific discourse, which benefits either the nearest relay of immediate information (Josette) or the activation of the speaker’s own critical judgement, allows the speakers to reinvest these discourses by articulating the information received with a counter discourse of their own.

Thus, in the following example, L1 opposes the views about the dangers of modern food, (views attributed to “they”), to the argument of the extension of life expectancy. L1 also rejects the underlying schematisation (“it was better before”) by recalling the dark sides of the so-called “golden age” (diseases, lack of hygiene):

L1 : euh bon à la fois on a on dit qu’on a une alimentation euh :: (..) détraquée :: enfin bon euh : (.) et puis euh : (.) à la fois non (.) je pense que par rapport à avant y a une alimentation globalement enfin (.) plus équilibrée disons que les gens (.) mangent

L2 : mmm (..) oui puis peut-être moins de féculents

L1 : mais enfin globalement on mange et c’est vrai que :: (.) la moyenne d’âge augmente et c’est :: (..lp..) on n’a : pas :: euh :: pfff : (.) je sais pas avant y en avait/
aussi des maladies euh qui étaient dues à autre chose/ un manque d’hygiène un
manque de (.) euh (.) bon (.)

[Corpus E]

L1: er well on the one hand they tell us that we have a er:: (.) crazy diet well then er:
(.) and at er (.) the same time no (.) I think that compared with before eating hab-
its are in general well (.) more balanced let’s say that people (.) eat

L2: mmm (.) yeah maybe less starchy foods

L1: but overall, we eat er and it’s true that: (.) the average lifespan is increasing and
it’s:: (..lp..) we don’t have er:: pff: (.) I don’t know before there were/ also disea-
ses er that were due to something else/ _a lack of hygiene a lack of er:: (.) er:: (.)
well (.)

Finally, if the frequency of reported speech sequences reflects the general
public’s dependence on various sources of information (mass media, but also
other informed intermediaries, like the chemist in the example above or in other
instances friends/experts), when citizens try to formulate an opinion about
issues like GMOs, “mad-cow” and other issues linked to food, the linguistic
treatment of the “other discourses” they refer to, clearly shows that they main-
tain a distance vis-à-vis the sources’ credibility, thus creating discursive areas
where autonomous argumentation can be developed.

3.4 Parallels and precedents

We can finally try to identify a more general configuration based essentially
on comparative structures. Those structures enable speakers to connect an
event linked to food with other events, linked or not to the same thematic field.
Thus, argumentative parallels are established between, for example, mad
cow disease, dioxin in chickens, GMOs, growth hormones in meat, and con-
taminated blood scandal; sometimes one goes from GMOs to the question of
palm oil in chocolate or from GMOs to salad in cling film. The following example
shows very well this kind of collision which are sometimes of a pretty baroque
nature:

F : (.) euh les Américains qui veulent tout gouverner maintenant qu’ils sont tout
seuls sur le marché ou presque (.) ils veulent nous infliger de de (.) une vache
folle avec des hormones/ alors qu’ils veulent pas nous (.) euh:: permettre que
des produits du terroir viennent chez eux sans surtaxe

F: (.) er the Americans who want to govern everything now that they are all alone on
the market or almost (.) they want to impose on us (.) a mad cow with hormons/
whereas they don’t want (.) er: to allow our farm products to go to their country
without charging extra taxes

Such parallels by invoking a past which is better understood, allows ordinary
speakers to position themselves within an unknown present. Thus GMOs are
often evoked in relation to the scandal of contaminated blood as shown in the
following example:

ça fait partie de tous ces dossiers comme le (.) bon le sang contaminé enfin je pense
qu’on (.) on le met sur le même plan enfin moi je: (.) je le mets un petit peu sur le
mêmes plan hein le : le côté financier faut il faut euh: (.) gagner économiser euh (.) sur
le dos des gens en fait

[Corpus I]

it’s the same for every issue like the contaminated blood; well, I think we put this on
the same level, at least, I put it on the same level. It’s got to do with money, they want
to save money on people’s backs.
In this case, the connection between the issues is explicit (the financial reason).

In the case of the OGM, resorting to analogy may also be a way to solve a problem perceived as belonging to a highly technical field. Thus, in the following example, the speaker resorts to an analogy with viruses in order to make his point, namely that GMOs may have disastrous consequences if spreading widely in the environment:

you know, it’s like a virus which tchouc ! spreads in nature and combines with…

The parallel drawn between GMO and the BSE crisis is based on the transmission/contamination idea:

Michel Martinet: [question about links between protein and BSE disease].
Xavier Leverve: what is so intriguing in the BSE disease, it’s that unlike most of diseases, which are transmitted by a live organism (bacteria, virus) here, it could be transmitted by a protein which would without any damage penetrate the organism through the digestive tube. […]

Martinet: the BSE disease is certainly linked concretly or fantasmatically to many of the issues we are to tackle [develop the idea that for the “mad cow disease” as for the GMOs, the problem is not so much the disease in itself than the fact that the means of transmission are present on large scale.]

Then, the question of evaluation and axiologisation is again at stake; indeed in all cases, these parallels, which perhaps facilitate cognition, are clearly marked within the debate. Being assimilated to diseases or to disease’s transmitters, GMO are negatively qualified.

To sum it up, an approach like the one we have presented requires that the analysis of data be both linear and in depth; this approach being essentially qualitative and not quantitative, we cannot claim to achieve representativeness. On the other hand, in association with classical quantitative studies, this approach can allow us to realise some in depth probe of micro-corpuses seen as strategic.

Furthermore, to the extent that in quantitative surveys these phenomena (such as food preferences, consumers information sources, etc.) are often the object of direct questions, we sustain the hypothesis that an indirect observation of specific discursive mechanisms can bring to light some results separate from those obtained through the answers to the survey.
3.5 Perspectives and applications

3.5.1 Perspectives

– Diversification of data: as it has been shown above, this kind of approach must not be seen as representative of the perception of food of French people in general, for instance; but multiplication and diversification of data can allow, (through multiple probes), to map out the perceptions held by the public about food. This can be achieved if we aim several fractions of the public identified by sociological surveys or if we address specific questions about food.

– Furthermore, the method outlined here, opens interesting perspectives for an intercultural approach of representations about food. It is possible to envision the collect of parallel corpuses (non directive interviews) involving western informants versus informants from developing countries. The analytical categories presented here could be used to outline dividing lines. We can thus make the hypothesis that the polarisation of opposed pairs such as quality/quantity, natural/artificial, tradition/modernity, where the first term is usually seen positively in our countries, could be frequently reversed in developing countries.

In this context, we plan to apply the method presented above to the discourses collected. Then we shall seek to link our linguistic observations with sociocultural, economic or political data characteristic of communities under study.

3.5.2 Applications

Discourse analysis and the analysis of argumentation applied to the discourse on food can allow:

– Improvement of the messages circulating during public campaigns on food

The approach proposed here cannot, on its own, serve the optimization of public policies on food, in so far as it is unable to account for the means of influencing and changing attitudes, the assessment of which would require other disciplines (for instance social psychology; see Questions de communication 5, for instance).

However, it enables prior systematic and argumented identification of those discursive parameters which, in the message, are likely to affect the attitudes in accordance with identified audiences (from a lexical point of view – choice of words – or from the point of view of the argumentative structure of messages; CHABROL 2004). Thus, this approach may guide the elaboration of messages and spare a preliminary phase of trial and error when devising the material.

– The improvement of analytical grids used in quantitative and lexicometric approaches

By taking into account spontaneous data, which are not elicited by the analyst but appear naturally in context, this approach can reveal some elements in consumer’s perception of food which the survey had not foreseen and which therefore had not so far been taken into account by the questionnaires and the research hypotheses guiding quantitative analysis of data. Thus, this approach
can participate to their re-consideration and contribute to a finer apprehension of ordinary representations of food.

REFERENCES


