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Chapter 4

Defining a Meal

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It is easy, by intuition, to subdivide eating into meals and snacks. This division also seems to dominate academic definitions, although scholars do not always define a meal in a precise way. A meal has been seen as a given and a self-evident, immanently understood entity, and the term has been used without any rigorous definitions.

Despite this loose use of the term, scholars are aware of the importance of the meal in the eating system - as a symbol, as a ritual, as a unifier, as a part of socialisation, as a distinction - and of its relationship and meaning to all human life and culture (see e.g. Charsley 1987, Lévi-Strauss 1966, Brown & Mussell 1984, Sjögren-de Beauchaine 1988, Singer 1984, Bourdieu 1984). A meal is also considered as belonging to a larger interdependent context of ecological, biological and socio-cultural systems (see Khare 1986, 160 - 161 and Jerome, Kandel & Pelto 1980, 4). Attempts to define this kaleidoscopic meal can easily yield an endless list of characteristics: nature, culture, environment, economy, social structure, social organisation, everyday life, feast, history etc.

Eating is an event in which people consume nutrients. Eating has a biological basis, but potential nourishment is defined edible and acceptable only by culture. Eating as a culturally constructed whole assumes many forms. It is important to realise that eating meals is only one form of eating, and many features typical of meals are easily connected with other kinds of eating. Yet meals seem to be a plausible starting point in studying food. On the one hand, meals appear to play a

vital role in everyday understanding. People eat meals and they talk about meals, but they do not regard them as the only form of eating. On the other hand, the division into meals and snacks also dominates the categorisations made by nutritionists and other scientists. Everyday understanding and scientific knowledge thus seem to agree in this respect.

Definitions and angles

All the definitions of a meal discussed in this paper share the same basic idea of linking meals to the sphere of culture rather than to the sphere of nature. Eating (meals) is always part of the transformation from nature to culture. One also common ingredient is that eating a meal is primarily seen as a social phenomenon. Georg Simmel, at the beginning of this century, was already pointing out the role of the meal in the socialisation process (Simmel 1910). Eating a meal is mainly a social sharing of both food and meanings. Another standpoint is to emphasise the material side of a meal by focusing on the properness of the meal, its material and technical construction.

Usually it is possible to find all the above mentioned features in definitions, but sometimes one side is stressed more than others. Some focus on the social side, others on the material side of meals. This clearly depends on the kind of research in question, and most definitions take all perspectives into account in some way. These views are neither opposed nor exclusive; they merely concentrate on different angles in analysing a meal.

The meal as a construction

A classical approach to defining meals was worked out by Mary Douglas. She has studied the dietetic rules of Leviticus, where the analysis and categories of purity and pollution are clearly connected with the environment and the way people classify their own environment and life (see Douglas 1985 (1966)). Douglas has also observed her own culture and asked "What defines the category of a meal in our home?" (Douglas 1975a, 250). She started analysing the structure of daily meals by using classifications and binary oppositions. She began by viewing the daily menu from the standpoint of a linguistic analogy. She classified meals, courses, helpings and mouthfuls and then tried to determine the categories of food. To Douglas, meals and drinks are two important opposite categories, e.g. in the relation between solids and liquids. A meal has both solid and liquid elements and it should also

have a dimension of bland - sweet - sour. For Douglas the meaning of a meal is based on a system of repeated analogies. (Douglas 1975 a, 253 - 257, 260.)

Before this general overview, Douglas had analysed, together with Michael Nicod, the structure of British working class meals. Firstly, Douglas and Nicod drew attention to the structural and sensory qualities embedded in the binary oppositions savoury/sweet, hot/cold, liquid/dry. This is essential in defining different types of meals. The other criteria for the classification are complexity, copiousness and ceremoniousness. A meal is not, however, the only type of eating. Nicod has presented four terms which describe the different forms of eating. 1. A food event is an occasion when food is eaten. 2. A structured event is a social occasion organised by rules concerning time, place and sequence of action. 3. Food eaten as a part of a structured event is a meal. A meal is connected to the rules of combination and sequence. 4. A snack is an unstructured food event without any rules of combination and sequence. The meal system consists of three types of meals: *A* a major meal/the main meal, *B* a minor meal/the second meal, and *C* a still less significant meal/the third meal (biscuits and a hot drink). (Douglas 1983, 83; Douglas & Gross 1981, 6 - 7; Douglas & Nicod 1974.) Thus, the model of Douglas and Nicod consists of complementary classifications.

The first course of meal *A* has, both on Sundays and weekdays the same basic structure based on a staple (potato), a centre (meat, fish or egg), trimmings¹ (vegetables) and dressing (gravy). Everything is savoury and hot. The second course has the same structure except that everything is sweet. The staple is cereal, the centre is fruit and the dressing is liquid custard or cream. Meal *B* follows the structure of meal *A*, but the staple is cereal (bread) and not potato. (Douglas & Nicod 1974.)

Mary Douglas' approach is a typical example of a definition based on the structural features of the meal. She studied different types of daily meals as well as the construction and content of these separate meals. Moreover, she took notice of the meanings related to meals and eating and in turn related them to social behaviour and order. It is no wonder that her point of view has been very influential, because she showed, together with Nicod, how useful the method of cutting meals into pieces can be.

Many scholars have followed and developed Douglas' ideas further. E.g. a group of American anthropologists published their results in a book edited by Douglas (1984). They all sought patterns in (meal)

¹ Douglas combined trimmings with the centrepiece in a later article (Douglas 1983).

eating and their relationship to social change and identity (see Whitehead 1984 and Powers & Powers 1984). Judith Goode, Karen Curtis and Janet Thephano (1984) studied meals in an Italian-American community. To them, members of a certain food system share the same patterning and repertory of eating.

The British sociologist Anne Murcott has studied the concept of a proper meal in South Wales. A proper meal is always a cooked dinner, actually very similar to what Douglas and Nicod found. According to Murcott, proper meals are always of a certain type. Creating a proper meal means transforming food items into a meal by cooking and combining ingredients in the right way. A proper meal consist of one course only, a plateful, which is always a variation of meat and two vegetables. "Meat" must be (fresh) meat; sausages or offal cannot be used. In an emergency, poultry can be used, but fish is ruled out, unlike in Douglas' construction. Necessary vegetables are potatoes and other vegetables, and at least one of them must be green. Finally, the gravy gives the finishing touch to the plateful and combines all the ingredients to make a proper meal. (Murcott 1982, 208 and 1986, 88.)

As we can see, meals are very often defined or characterised by "counting" the components: the foodstuffs chosen, the way they are prepared and combined, the number of courses served and of dishes within each course (see Abrahams 1984, 20). This point of view is perhaps taken furthest by Michael P. Carroll (1982). According to Carroll, meals are characterised by a variety of tripartite classification schemes. A typical American eats three meals a day, uses three table utensils, eats three courses etc. Carroll gives this as an example of tabular thinking and making lists. This kind of thinking reflects the rise of literacy, which meant that people started to list different features of meal. Slowly, these lists changed so that every list had the same number of elements and thereby created a table.

The meal as a social phenomenon

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Eating meals does not only amount to eating certain ingredients cooked in a certain way in a certain order. With whom and under what conditions we eat is also important. Furthermore, what is the etiquette, what is the distinction between a meal and a snack? The sociability of eating, the fact that a meal is shared with other people, is often considered essential. This does not mean that people eating alone are not eating meals. They certainly do eat meals, because they share the same cultural idea of a meal, which includes the sociability of eating. However, many scholars exploit this social nature of a meal in order to build more sophisticated analyses and definitions.

Seeing a meal as a social event is the other essential side of eating. E.g. Mary Douglas and Michael Nicod were not only analysing the construction of a meal. They were also especially interested in food as a marker of social relations and its role in everyday life and feast. They also sought the regularities between social behaviour and eating. (Douglas 1975 b, 15; Douglas & Nicod 1974, 744.) The idea is to connect meals to a wider social system in which a meal is one ordered system related to the other ordered systems (Douglas 1975a, 254 and 272.) The sequence, rules and ranking of the meals is vital to social life, since they are part of a system of intimacy and distance in British culture. Drinks are for strangers, meals are for the family and friends. (Douglas 1983, 88 and 1975a, 256.)

For Anne Murcott, a proper meal is also essentially a social affair. This side of eating is emphasised even more by Nickie Charles and Marion Kerr (1988). For them, food is an important part of the social reproduction in the family. A proper meal is the same as for Murcott: a cooked meal with meat (fish), potatoes and vegetables as opposed to a snack. A proper meal is a social occasion in which the family eats together. The contents are not the only definers of a proper meal. A meal is also defined by the way it is eaten (Charles & Kerr 1988, 21). The properness of meals is even more crystallised in Sunday and Christmas dinners, which are clearly symbols of the family. Sidney Mintz (1986) has stressed that meals must be eaten by everyone at the same time. They consist of the same items for all eaters, served and eaten in a fixed order. (Mintz 1986, 201.) It is impossible to exercise everyone's individual preferences during a meal.

Annick Sjögren-de Beauchaine (1988) adopts the same approach. In her study of French bourgeoisie meals she found a three course meal structure for a real meal (*un vrai repas*), but her main interest was focused on the ordered social action of the ritualised sharing of food during a meal. A meal is a ritual, which is also vital for the unity of the family and a form of socialisation. Meals are both formal and informal and intimate at the same time. Meals play an important role in marking closeness and distance. (Sjögren-de Beauchaine 1988, 73 and 189, see also Douglas & Nicod 1974.)

The idea of the social nature of meals is often clarified when a snack is mentioned as a counterpart for a meal. Snacking is usually described as the spontaneous and irregular consumption of food, and a meal as a ritual regulated by rules concerning behaviour and sharing food at table. Meals are eaten at routine times and they are social events, whereas snacks eaten more randomly, are not (Whitehead 1984). A meal is also structured by time and space, which are important components in

the meal ritual (Sjögren-de Beauchaine 1988). Moreover, meal structure and meal rhythm also organise and affect the temporal pattern of the day and the year (Nordström 1988).

The meal as a subset in the eating space

In a way, most of the definitions focus on either the "properness" or the "realness" of the meal. A proper meal consists of different ingredients and cooking methods combined in the right way and order. As a concept, a proper meal concentrates on the technical-material qualities and requirements of a meal. A real meal requires more than just the right construction. A real meal entails social sharing of food. However, a proper meal and a real meal are not wholly different categories. They are rather partners in a continuing dialogue. They map out the same territory, but from different angles.

However eating (meals) is such a complicated phenomenon that one could ask what the necessary characteristics of a useful definition really are. Firstly, the dimensions of nature and culture are always present in the transformation of nourishment, a product of nature, into food; a product of culture. Secondly, the construction of a meal is based on rules concerning the choice of food items, the number of courses and dishes, the ways of cooking, i.e. the entire order of the meal. The meal structure is closely related to the meal rhythm, which is organised by time and space. Thirdly, a meal is a social event. A meal means eating together, sharing the same food with other people. Eating alone is only a simulation of a real meal. Behaviour at the table is regulated by etiquette. As meals are social, they also carry the heavy burden of being arenas for socialisation, reproduction, identification, tradition, etc. A meal is also a ritual, a symbol and it carries meanings which are shared by people eating together. Fourthly, the structural and social aspects of eating are organised by rules. These rules, the formality of meals and eating, combine the structural and social features of meals and eating. They are necessary elements in the transformation of natural nourishment into cultured food. Fifthly, as meals and the whole eating system are culturally constructed, they cannot be separated from other fields of life. The rules and classifications connected with eating are related to other socio-cultural entities and are one manifestation of them. Finally, it is impossible to entirely exclude the biological basis of eating.

Nowadays, eating seems to be under constant change, which raises some doubts about the possibilities of defining a meal, and makes it difficult to force different forms of eating into opposite categories such as meals and snacks. One solution could be to analyse eating as a whole

and not compulsively try to pinpoint meals. Seeing a meal definitely as an inseparable part of eating better enables us to observe all features affecting meals and eating not only as opposites but also as continua.

Therefore, the entire field of eating could be seen as a space spanned by many dimensions. Different types of eating are points in this space, e.g. meals form a subset in the eating space. Understanding eating as a multi-dimensional space makes analysing and categorising eating more flexible.

The first dimension is the structure of eating. This refers to the material-technical construction of eating: the complexity of practices concerning the choice of foodstuff, ways of preparation, and combinations of different items. This side of eating could be seen as a system of signs which regulates the relationship between different elements of eating. E.g. a meal is a composition of certain foodstuffs prepared in a certain way and combined in a certain way.

The second dimension outlines the sociability of eating, e.g. whether people are eating alone or with other people. It also deals with the social organisation of eating, which includes different kinds of sitting, serving and eating orders. Eating as a social event can be seen as a ritualised interaction organising and renewing the social relationships in a social group or community.

The third dimension is formality, which has important links with the two other dimensions. Formality refers to all kind of rules affecting both the structure and the sociability of eating. This dimension is essential as an intermediary between the two other dimensions. The degree of formality in different eating situations has an effect on both the structure and the sociability of eating. When e.g. a head of state gives a dinner, the rules concerning the structure and etiquette are more strict and precise than at a family dinner.

The basic question in all these dimensions is the transformation of nourishment provided by nature into culturally accepted and structured food. Seeing eating as a space hopefully makes it possible to handle all the different forms and types of eating, not only as opposites, but as subsets in the same multi-dimensional space.

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