# 5

# CHINESE, FOOD AND MENUS

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## Introduction

Food is a necessity of human life. In addition to fulfilling survival needs, food also satiates the taste buds, provides comfort and establishes a sense of family and community through the experience of sharing food. The importance of food is particularly stressed in the Chinese culture and well reflected in the Chinese language. As the Chinese saying goes, 民以食为天 *mín yǐ shí wéi tiān* 'Food is the heaven for the people'. When Chinese people meet each other, they often ask, "Have you eaten (你吃了吗 *nǐ chī le ma*)?", a greeting similar to "How are you?" in English, which opens the conversation via an exchange of recent eating experiences. The consumption of food is not only a common topic in conversations but also is infused with philosophical conceptualizations. Dilin Liu proposed in his book *Metaphor, Culture and Worldview: The Case of American English and the Chinese Language* that "Chinese people view life as an eating event" (Liu 2002: 70). One place where the analogy between eating and life is abundant is in political discourses. Sterckx (2011: 49) noted that "[c]ooking, eating, feeding, dining and banqueting were a much-used craft analogy for good and moral government in traditional China". For instance, the Ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu 老子 made the famous statement that "governing a big nation is like cooking a small fish" (治大国如烹小鲜 *zhì dàguó rú pēng xiǎo xiān*); however, what Lao Tzu saw as common between the two is open to interpretation. While some think the key is keeping the balance among different elements, others are drawn to the contrast between "big" and "small" and interpret the analogy as an admonition to avoid overdoing the governing.

   Philosophy and politics aside, this chapter will focus on the language of food and menus, that is, the words and phrases that people use to describe food, cooking and dining. Given the significance of food in the Chinese culture, it is not surprising that James D. McCawley (1984) devoted a whole book, *The Eater's Guide to Chinese Characters*, to food-related Chinese characters, with detailed descriptions of their etymology, orthography and semantics. The goal of this chapter is not to focus only on characters or go through the entire food-related lexicon; instead, this chapter will discuss a few examples of the research on food names and the language of menus that illustrate the significance and diversity of this line of research. Specifically, these examples will show that the language of food may encode the history of international trade and cultural interaction, as well as convey implicit information about the

price of food items; in addition, the extensive metaphorical use of food-related words could provide an interesting case of study for semanticists and cognitive linguists.

Before proceeding further, it should be acknowledged that much of the content in this chapter was inspired by Dan Jurafsky's book *The Language of Food: A Linguist Reads the Menu* (Jurafsky 2014). Jurafsky (2014) investigated the historical development of menus, the origins of common foods (e.g. *ketchup*, *toast*, *macaron*) and the etymology of their names. Additionally, Jurafsky (2014) looked at the use of food-related language in modern English, covering topics like how metaphors are used to describe tastes and how variations of food names are associated with price, marketing strategy and eaters' perceptions of food. The last example discussed in this chapter, which focusses on a pilot study of the language of Chinese (Cantonese) menus, is a preliminary replication of Jurafsky's (2014) study of English menus.

## Food names: a journey in time and space

An often-cited example of the complicated history of food names is the word *ketchup*. In modern English, *ketchup* (or *tomato ketchup*) refers to a commonly used, sweet-and-sour table sauce that features tomatoes as the main ingredient. A widespread folk etymology attributes *ketchup* to an alleged Cantonese origin, from the Cantonese word 茄汁 *kezap* 'tomato sauce'. Despite the almost perfect match in both sound and meaning, it is implausible that *ketchup* originated from *kezap*, because ketchup has been around for a few hundred years and tomatoes were added to ketchup beginning in the nineteenth century. In Chapter 4 of his book, Jurafsky (2014) gave a compelling account of the history of *ketchup* and the evolution of ketchup recipes. The earliest form of ketchup was a fermented fish product popularized by Southeast Asians (i.e. the Vietnamese, Cambodians and Thais), whose early ancestors brought the tradition of fermenting seafood with them when they were driven out of what is now southern China by the Chinese Han people around 200 BCE. When the Fujianese traders and sailors encountered the sauce, probably around the sixteenth century, they coined the name *ke-tchup*, meaning "preserved-fish sauce" in their native Hokkien language. In the following two centuries, British merchants acquired the sauce as well as its name when they traded with Chinese manufacturers in Indonesia. The introduction of ketchup to England as an exotic Asian sauce led to a few mimicking recipes using more affordable ingredients, such as anchovies, shallots, mushrooms and, later, tomatoes. In the modern version of ketchup, owing largely to the popularity of Heinz ketchup in the United States, tomatoes have taken over as the main ingredient, combined with sugar and vinegar, which gives the sauce its current sweet-and-sour taste.

Interestingly, when the reformed ketchup was introduced back to China in the early twentieth century, with the Hokkien root of the name no longer discernible, the sauce acquired new names in Chinese, such as *kezap* in Cantonese (used mostly by Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong) and 番茄酱 *fānqié jiàng* 'tomato sauce' or 番茄沙司 *fānqié shāsī* 'tomato sauce' in Mandarin. While both 汁 *zhī* (or *zap* in Cantonese) and 酱 *jiàng* are native Chinese words meaning "liquid or semi-liquid food" (e.g. sauce, paste, etc.), 沙司 *shāsī* is clearly borrowed from the English word *sauce*, probably first developed in Shanghai, one of the treaty ports in the 19th century, where the local Shanghainese language pronounces *shāsī* as *susi*. The folk etymology that alleged a Cantonese origin of *ketchup*, as it turns out, was caused by a fortuitous coincidence that the Cantonese word 茄 *ke*, literally "eggplant" but also shorthand for "tomato", sounds similar to the old Hokkien word *ke* 'preserved fish', which had died out long before tomato-based ketchup hit the Chinese market.

The story of ketchup travelling from the East to the West and back to the East is quite extraordinary, but one might wonder if it has any significance at all for today's readers (and diners).

As Jurafsky (2014: 61) pointed out nicely, "[t]he Chinese origins of [ketchup] aren't just a fun bit of culinary trivia – ketchup's history offers us new insights into global economic history". Indeed, the history of food names is often intertwined with that of international trade, migration, language contact and cultural exchange. A more powerful example is shown in the names of tea across languages. Originating from China, tea was spread to different parts of the world through centuries of international trade and transportation. This was done via two main routes and their associated trade networks (Tsunoyama 角山栄 1980; Kieschnick 2003; among others): the Silk Road (or the Tea-Horse Road; see Chen 陈宝亚 2011; Chen and Yuan 陈宝亚, 袁琳 2015) in the north, where commodity travelled by land and the Maritime Silk Road in the south, where it travelled by water. Subsequently, the Chinese name, 茶 *chá* 'tea', was introduced into various languages as their speakers adopted the tea-drinking culture – but in different forms, depending on which route of trade was utilized initially. The northern Silk Road brought the pronunciation *cha* or *chaj* – similar to modern Mandarin (*chá*) and Cantonese (*tsa*) pronunciations – to the languages of North, Central and Southwest Asia and beyond (e.g. Mongolian, Russian, Turkish, Arabic, Urdu, Farsi, etc.). Chen and Yuan 陈宝亚, 袁琳 (2015) further distinguished two sub-routes in the north that were responsible, respectively, for the spread of *cha* and *chaj* (i.e. with a *i/j* ending). On the other hand, the Maritime Silk Road, which started in coastal Fujian Province and reached as far as Western Europe, brought the Hokkien pronunciation *te* to English, French, Italian, Spanish and many other European languages, resulting in, among other things, the English word *tea*. The journey of tea – and its names – is still ongoing to this day. For example, hip neighbourhoods with lots of coffee shops have a tea drink called *chai tea* on the menu, which is originally from India and brewed with mixed spices and herbs. Its full name, *masala chai*, literally "mixed-spice tea" in Hindi, was shortened to *chai* (e.g. *chai latte*) when the drink was introduced to the United States, as English speakers failed to recognize that *chai* only means "tea". Furthermore, some felt it necessary to clarify that *chai* is a type of tea and hence called it *chai tea*, which literally means "tea tea".

## Semantic change and polysemy: the example of 吃 *chī*

What happened to the word *chai* in American coffee shops (and later in coffee shops in other countries) is what is called "semantic narrowing", as the meaning of *chai* went from generic tea to a specific type of tea. *Chai* is certainly not the only food word that has taken on some sort of semantic change. In fact, compared to food names, dining-related verbs are probably more prone to change – and polysemy as a result, because they can be used in more varied contexts. A remarkable example of polysemy is the Chinese word 吃 *chī* 'to eat'. According to the Chinese WordNet (CWN), *chī* has 28 senses, covering a wide range of meanings that go well beyond the physiological process of food consumption (Huang et al. 2010). In addition to the prototypical meaning of "eating solid food" (e.g. 吃面条 *chī miàntiáo* 'eat noodles', 吃饭 *chī fàn* 'eat rice'), the verb can also mean "drinking" (e.g. 吃茶 *chī chá* '(lit.) eat tea, i.e. drink tea'), suckling (e.g. 吃奶 *chī nǎi* '(lit.) eat milk, i.e. suckle') and "consuming non-food objects" (e.g. 吃药 *chī yào* '(lit.) eat medicine, i.e. take medicine'). By extension, *chī* can also take NP objects that denote the location of the eating event, such as 吃食堂 *chī shítáng* 'eat (in the) canteen' and 吃馆子 *chī guǎnzi* 'eat (in the) restaurant'. Furthermore, the prototypical process of eating is comprised of a number of subprocesses, including obtaining food, putting food into the mouth, chewing and swallowing; along these lines, *chī* has developed a number of metaphorical senses (see Table 5.1), many of which have to do with the process of receiving and/or consuming something (for more details, see Huang 1990; Tao 陶红印 2000; Yan 严

*Table 5.1* Some of the main metaphoric senses of 吃*chī*

| Sense | Examples |
| --- | --- |
| to live off | 吃劳保 *chī lǎobǎo* 'to live off welfare'; <br> 吃父母 *chī fùmǔ* 'to live off parents' |
| to absorb | 棉布吃水 *miánbù chī shuǐ* 'cotton cloth absorbs water' |
| to understand | 吃透 *chītòu* 'to understand thoroughly' |
| to eliminate | 吃掉一个棋子 *chī diào yīgè qízǐ* 'to eat a chess piece' |
| to consume (strength, power) | 吃力 *chīlì* 'consuming strength, strenuous' |
| to acquire | 吃回扣 *chī huíkòu* 'to get commission' |
| to receive (something unpleasant) | 吃批评 *chī pīpíng* 'to receive criticism' |
| to endure | 吃苦 *chīkǔ* 'to endure hardships' |
| to accept | 吃软不吃硬 *chī ruǎn bù chī yìng* '(lit.) eat soft not eat hard, i.e. accepting reasoning/pleading but not accepting force' |

辰松 2006; Hong et al. 2008; Newman 2009; Tan 谭爽 2010; Ye 2010; Hong et al. 2012; He and Zhao 赫琳, 赵晓丽 2016; Hsiao et al. 2016). The polysemy of *chī* probably has to do with the ubiquity of the prototypical eating event in everyday life. Huang (1990) further stated that the original meaning of *chī* is significantly bleached in its idiomatic uses, to a point that *chī* is almost like a light verb.

## Idioms and metaphors related to food

The idiomatic use of food-related words has been mentioned a few times already, both in the beginning of this chapter, with the analogy between eating and life, and in the example of *chī* in the section above. In fact, this is such a widespread phenomenon that it deserves a separate focussed discussion. Food-related terms can be likened to or compared with a variety of concepts in other cognitive categories. Kövecses (2010) suggested that cooking and food is one of the most common source domains of conceptual metaphors. Table 5.2 shows some examples of Chinese idioms and proverbs where food is the source domain of the metaphor.

Since food items can be described from different perspectives (e.g. food content, appearance, taste, texture, touch, cooking method, etc.), they can be further divided into subtypes of food/cooking-related metaphors, depending on which aspect of food is the source domain of the metaphor. The following will describe each sub-type in more detail.

### *Food content as the source domain*

Some food items have conventionalized metaphorical associations in Chinese. For instance, 白菜 *báicài* 'Chinese cabbage' can be a metaphor for a good bargain because cabbage is often very cheap. On the other hand, 馅饼 *xiàn bǐng* 'stuffed pie' is considered a delicious treat, and thus 天上掉馅饼 *tiānshàng diào xiàn bǐng* '(lit.) stuffed pies fall from the sky' describes a scenario where something great happens without any effort or work – a scenario that is too good to be true. 豆腐渣 *dòufu zhā* 'tofu dregs, i.e. leftover from the process of making tofu' is often associated with negative meanings, such as poorly constructed buildings and infrastructure as a result of using low-quality materials and cutting corners in the building process (e.g. 豆腐渣 工程 *dòufu zhā gōngchéng* '(lit.) tofu dregs building projects').

*Table 5.2* Examples of Chinese idioms and proverbs where food is the source domain of the metaphor

| Chinese idiom/proverb | Literal meaning | Actual meaning |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 分一杯羹 *fēn yībēi gēng* | 'to share a cup of gravy' | 'to share profits' |
| 小菜一碟 *xiǎo cài yī dié* | 'a small dish' | 'something that can be easily done, i.e. a piece of cake' |
| 家常便饭 *jiācháng biànfàn* | 'a home-style meal' | 'a common and ordinary event that happens frequently' |
| 天下无不散的筵席 *tiānxià wú búsàn de yánxí* | 'there is no never-ending banquet under the sun' | 'all good things must come to an end' |

## Appearance of food as the source domain

The appearance of food (e.g. shape, colour, etc.) is often analogized to the look of people. For example, a beautiful girl may have 杏眼 *xìngyǎn* 'almond-shaped eyes', 樱桃小嘴 *yīngtáo xiǎozuǐ* 'a small cherry-like mouth' and 瓜子脸 *guāzǐ liǎn* 'sunflower-seed-shaped face, i.e. a face with a small, pointy chin'. When the appearance of food is likened to less attractive features of the human body, however, the metaphor usually has a derogative meaning. To say that someone is short may be impolite, but to call someone 矮冬瓜 *ǎi dōngguā* '(lit.) short winter melon, i.e. a short person' is an insult. Interestingly, while losing weight seems to be the dream of everyone every summer, to be called 豆芽菜 *dòuyácài* '(lit.) bean sprouts, i.e. a very skinny person' has a negative connotation, perhaps because bean sprouts have a plain appearance. Other examples of metaphors from the shape of food include 吃鸭蛋 *chī yādàn* '(lit.) to eat a duck egg, i.e. to get a zero mark on an exam' and 吃黑枣 *chī hēizǎo* '(lit.) to eat a black date, i.e. to be executed by a bullet'. It is also common to use food items to characterize colours, for instance, 栗色 *lìsè* '(lit.) chestnut colour, i.e. maroon', 枣红 *zǎohóng* '(lit.) date-like red, i.e. claret' and 茶色 *chásè* '(lit.) tea colour, i.e. dark brown'.

## Taste of food as the source domain

The soul of Chinese food is often considered to be its complex and rich taste. The five universal basic tastes are 酸 *suān* 'sour', 甜 *tián* 'sweet', 苦 *kǔ* 'bitter', 咸 *xián* 'salty' and 鲜 *xiān* 'umami'. When it comes to Chinese food, it seems unfair to leave out 辣 *là* 'spicy' in the discussion, although strictly speaking, spiciness is not a taste but a sensation perceived by the nerves. As shown in the frequently used taste-related idiom 酸甜苦辣 *suāntiánkǔlà* '(lit.) sour, sweet, bitter and spicy', which describes the ups and downs in life as four distinctive flavours mixed together, *là* 'spicy' is considered parallel to the other three tastes. In fact, these four are also the most productive food tastes in metaphorical uses. The metaphorical meanings associated with each of the four tastes will be explained in the following.

Sourness is often related to jealousy and meanness in Chinese, probably due to its sharp taste, as shown in various idioms with *suān* 'sour' or 醋 *cù* 'vinegar' (e.g. Xu and Xu 徐小佳, 许曦明 2002). Examples include 吃醋 *chī cù* '(lit.) to eat vinegar, i.e. to be jealous' and 尖酸 *jiānsuān kèbó* '(lit.) sharp and sour, i.e. mean'. Moreover, since sourness also suggests that the food has gone bad, its metaphorical extension includes 'outdated', 'ill-fitting', 'not generous' and, further, 'sorrow, grief'. Some examples are 酸腐 *suānfǔ* '(lit.) sour and rotten, i.e. outdated and pedantic', 寒酸 *hánsuān* '(lit.) cold and sour, i.e. shabby' and 心酸 *xīnsuān* '(lit.) heart is sour, i.e. sad'.

Sweetness is probably universally associated with positive meanings. Shao and Zhang 绍新, 张晶 (2012) summarized that *tián* 'sweet' can be used to describe sound (e.g. 声音 很甜 *shēngyīn hěn tián* 'voice is very sweet'), sight (e.g. 甜美的微笑 *tiánměi de wéixiào* 'sweet smile'), fragrance (e.g. 甜甜的橘花香 *tiántián de jú huāxiāng* 'sweet fragrance of orange blossoms') and time and experience (e.g. 甜蜜的日子*tiánmì de rìzi* 'sweet days'). Such metaphorical uses are also connected to synaesthetic expressions in the language (Huang and Xiong 2018; see Chapter 19 of this volume).

On the contrary, *kǔ* 'bitter' seems to be universally negative. In Chinese, bitterness is only associated with negative meanings, relating to unpleasant images (e.g. 苦瓜脸 *kǔguā liǎn* '(lit.) bitter gourd face, i.e. sad-looking face'), hardships (e.g. 含辛茹苦 *hánxīnrúkǔ* '(lit.) to have something spicy and bitter in the mouth, i.e. to suffer hardships and difficulties'), uncomfortable or extreme weather (e.g. 冬日苦寒 *dōngrì kǔhán* '(lit.) bitter-cold winter, i.e. freezing winter') and depressive moods (e.g. 苦涩 *kǔsè* '(lit.) bitter and astringent, i.e. a bitter mood') (for more details, see Wang 王银平 2010).

Spiciness is the most controversial taste. Spicy food is widely adored in some parts of China, especially in the west, but is generally eschewed in the coastal areas in the east. Accordingly, the word *là* 'spicy' has developed both positive and negative connotations. In phrases like 吃香喝辣 *chīxiānghēlà* '(lit.) to eat fragrant food and drink spicy soups, i.e. to enjoy a lavish life', spicy food is emblematic of the delightful treats that life has to offer. Meanwhile, the pungent, burning taste of spicy food is also likened to some strong personalities, ranging from the cheeky and lively spirit one might find in a young woman (e.g. 辣妹子 *là mèizi* '(lit.) spicy girl, i.e. sassy girl') and a decisive, feisty and potentially aggressive character that may or may not be liked by other people (e.g. 泼辣 *pōlà* 'feisty, aggressive') to a chilling cruel and merciless soul that no one would want to cross (e.g. 心狠手辣 *xīnhěnshǒulà* '(lit.) heart is cruel and hands are spicy, i.e. with a cruel heart and ruthless means').

### *Texture or touch of food as the source domain*

A few food-related idioms in Chinese are derived from the texture or the touch (e.g. softness, smoothness, etc.) of food items. For example, 油 *yóu* 'oil' makes the surface smooth, and thus *yóu* (or 油滑 *yóuhuá* '(lit.) slippery like oil') can be used to describe a sly, cunning person. By contrast, 面 *miàn* 'flour' can mean "dull, incompetent, indecisive", probably because flour is loose and messy and makes the surface rough. Tofu is known for its softness, and hence 刀子 嘴, 豆腐心 *dāozi zuǐ, dòufu xīn* '(lit.) a mouth like a knife, a heart like tofu' describes someone who talks ruthlessly but has a tender heart. Similarly, 软柿子 *ruǎn shìzi* '(lit.) soft persimmon' is a metaphor for an easily manipulated and intimidated person (similar to a *pushover* in English) and 烫手山芋 *tàngshǒu shānyù* '(lit.) hand-burning steaming hot yam' describes a thorny problem that nobody wants to deal with. Of course, in these cases, the food items are conventionalized as part of the metaphor (e.g. 软番茄 *ruǎn fānqié* 'soft tomato' is not as metaphorical as *ruǎn shìzi* is), but it is really the texture of the food that gives rise to the metaphorical meaning.

### *Cooking method as the source domain*

Some of the most common Chinese cooking methods, such as 炒 *chǎo* 'to stir fry', 煎 *jiān* 'to pan fry', and 熬 *áo* 'to stew', are associated with frequently used metaphors. The most versatile one is *chǎo* 'to stir fry', the cooking technique that requires a high flame and repeated and fast stirring motions. Correspondingly, the metaphorical extension of *chǎo* can mean "making

short-term, speculative (and risky) investments" (e.g. 炒股 *chǎogǔ* 'to speculate in stocks', 炒地皮 *chǎo dìpí* 'to speculate in land'), or "creating sensational news in the media" (e.g. 炒作 *chǎozuò* 'hype, speculation, to promote (in the media)') or "repeating old information" (e.g. 炒冷饭 *chǎo lěngfàn* '(lit.) to stir fry leftover rice').

A similar cooking method is *jiān* 'to pan fry', which also requires a high heat but does not involve stirring. Similar to the English word *grill*, the metaphorical meaning of *jiān* in Chinese is associated with the intensity of pressure and suffering, as shown in the example 心煎如焚 *xīn jiān rú fén* '(lit.) heart being grilled, as if burned, i.e. being burned with anxiety'. A slightly different method is *áo* 'to stew', which does not require a high heat but needs time. By itself, *áo* can mean "endure, get through (something unpleasant)", such as 熬夜 *áo yè* 'to pull an all-nighter'. However, when *jiān* and *áo* are combined, the gruesome result is 煎熬 *jiānáo*, which refers to a type of pain or suffering that is both intense and prolonged.

## Menu language and food prices: a pilot study of menus in Hong Kong restaurants

So far, the focus has been mostly on the food-related lexicon. Next, the language of menus will be explored through a pilot study which studied the relationship between the language used on menus and the prices of dishes in Hong Kong restaurants, as a preliminary replication of Jurafsky's (2014) study of English menus, which showed that dishes with longer names and rarer words tended to be more expensive. On average, when the average length (i.e. number of letters) of the words in the name increased by one letter, the price of the dish went up by 18 cents. Furthermore, the use of certain words – especially modifiers (e.g. *fresh, delicate, organic*) and words from foreign languages – were also cues to the price of the food.

The data for the pilot study came from OpenRice (www.openrice.com), the most popular food review website in Hong Kong. First, a sample of 250 restaurants was compiled by searching for "Cantonese restaurants" in three locations: Central in Hong Kong Island (N = 68) and Mong Kok (MK; N = 65) and Tsim Sha Tsui (TST; N = 117) on the Kowloon side. All three locations have a high density of restaurants. Specifically, Central is in the heart of the Central Business District (CBD) of Hong Kong, and both MK and TST are major shopping and dining areas frequented by local residents and tourists, with TST having more high-end shops and restaurants and MK being more affordable.

For each sampled restaurant, its menus (both Chinese and English, if available) and the average spending per person (hereafter "average spend") were extracted from OpenRice. Some restaurants had uploaded their official menus to OpenRice, but in most cases, the menus were contributed by diners who uploaded pictures of the restaurant together with their food reviews. Average spend was listed as price ranges of restaurants on OpenRice, based on diners' self-reports.

As shown in Table 5.3 next, the average spent was less than HK$400 at most restaurants. Dessert places, noodle shops or the so-called "tea restaurants" (茶餐厅 *chá cān tīng*) had on average expenditures less than HK$50, where one can get set meals that include some starch (e.g. noodles, rice topping, etc.) and a drink. The more expensive restaurants usually offered more a la carte items and catered to larger parties; as average spend went up, it was also more likely to find exquisite dishes such as fresh seafood and barbequed whole piglets. Nevertheless, quite a number of signature Hong Kong Cantonese dishes – for instance, various 点心 *dim sum* items (e.g. 虾饺 *xiā jiǎo* 'shrimp dumplings', 烧卖 *shāo mài* 'pork and mushroom dumplings', 萝卜糕 *luó bó gāo* 'raddish cake' and 凤爪 *fèng zhuǎ* 'chicken feet') and barbequed and braised meats (叉烧 *chā shāo* 'barbequed pork', 烧鸭/鹅 *shāo yā/é* 'roasted duck/

*Table 5.3* Self-reported average spend of the 250 restaurants

| Self-reported average spend (per person) | | Number of restaurants in the category |
|---|---|---|
| Price range (in HK$ and US$) | Converted value | |
| <HK$50 (US$6.4) | 25 | 45 |
| HK$51 to 100 (US$6.5 to 12.8) | 75 | 29 |
| HK$101 to 200 (US$13.0 to 25.6) | 150 | 71 |
| HK$201 to 400 (US$25.8 to 51.3) | 300 | 72 |
| HK$401 to 800 (US$51.4 to 102.6) | 600 | 25 |
| >HK$801 (US$102.7) | 900* | 7 |

\* An arbitrary number, 900, was used for the price range ">HK$800".

goose', 乳鸽 *rǔ gē* 'roasted pigeon', 豉油鸡 *chǐ yóu jī* 'soy sauce-braised chicken', etc.) – were found in both cheaper and pricier restaurants.

A simple linear regression analysis was carried out to test whether the average price of a restaurant (i.e. the reported average spend) could be predicted by whether the restaurant has an English menu, whether the restaurant has a Chinese menu and the restaurant's location (i.e. Central, MK and TST). For this analysis, the average bill was converted from a numerical range to a number corresponding (roughly) to the mid-point of the range (see Table 5.3). To avoid repeated representations of the same restaurant, restaurants that belonged to the same chain were excluded (N = 33). The results showed that restaurants that had English menus tended to be more expensive by over HK$100 ($\beta = 105.5$, $t = 3.41$, $p < .001$), while restaurants that had Chinese menus showed no significant difference. This lack of effect was probably due to the fact that almost all the restaurants had Chinese menus, whereas by comparison, only half of the restaurants had English menus.

Furthermore, there was a weak effect of restaurant location. Overall, if restaurants in Central were used as baseline, TST restaurants tended to be more expensive by HK$75 ($\beta = 75.3$, $t = 2.03$, $p = .04$) and MK restaurants tended to be cheaper ($\beta = –82.7$, $t = –1.887$, $p = .06$), although the difference between MK and Central was only marginally significant. When MK was used as baseline, TST restaurants were significantly more expensive by HK$158 ($\beta = 158.06$, $t = 4.04$, $p < .001$). While the difference between TST and MK was expected, the direction of the difference between Central and TST was not, as one might expect Central to have the most expensive restaurants in town given its CBD status. The seemingly surprising regional differences could be explained by the distribution of different types of restaurants across the regions. A post-hoc analysis searched for restaurants in the "fine dining" category on OpenRice and found 25 in Central, 18 in TST and only 1 in Mong Kok, all of which were above HK$400 per person. In comparison, in the sample of Cantonese restaurants, nearly half (N = 117) were in TST, with Central and MK splitting the other half. In other words, Central had a larger proportion of restaurants with fancier, more exotic and more expensive cuisine, whereas in the category of Cantonese restaurants – which featured local Hong Kong cuisine – more restaurants, including the top-priced ones, were located in TST.

Two more statistical analyses were conducted to take a closer look at the relationship between the language on the menus and the price of the food items. Only Chinese menus were included in these analyses. Based on the restaurant database, a separate database of food items was compiled by extracting the names and listed prices of all the dishes from all the available Chinese menus of the sampled restaurants. Repeated representations of chain restaurants

were excluded, as in the restaurant-based analysis; restaurants without Chinese menus and food items without listed prices (i.e. incomplete menus or items on a multicourse banquet menu) were also excluded. The dataset contained 6,474 food items from 190 restaurants. The categories of food items were then manually annotated, loosely based on categorization (if available) by restaurant as shown on the menus. Table 5.4 shows the total number of items in each coded category:

The first item-based analysis set out to examine the relationship between the length of the food items' names (i.e. the number of Chinese characters and punctuations in the name) and the average meal bill of the restaurant. A mixed-effects model was built on the length of the food name, with average bill at the restaurant and coded item category as fixed effects. The length of the food name was log-transformed to approach a more normal distribution. Restaurant was entered as a random effect to control for individual differences across restaurants. The results showed that average spend had a significant positive effect on the length of the food item's name ($\beta = 0.00017$, $t = 2.31$, 95% confidence interval = [0.000026, 0.00032]); that is to say, more expensive restaurants had longer food names on the menu, after the type of food was taken into account.

However, was this broad relationship between average money spent and length of the food name reflected in the price of individual food items? Average spend – the amount of money people spent in a restaurant – could have been driven up by other factors. Apart from pricier dishes, smaller portions, which would require diners to order more dishes, would also increase the cost of a meal, not to mention additional expenses such as drinks, service charge, etc. Moreover, the results of the first analysis revealed a general trend across restaurants, that is, more expensive restaurants had longer food names, but were there also correlations between food names and food prices *within* a restaurant? To answer these questions, a second item-based analysis was conducted by building a mixed-effects model on the listed price of individual food items, which was log-transformed for a more normal distribution. The (log-transformed) length of the food names was entered as a critical fixed effect, with average money spent at the restaurant and coded item category both entered as control fixed effects; restaurants were entered as a random effect. The results showed that after controlling for the average money spent at the restaurant and food item category, there was a strong, positive effect of the length of the food name on the listed price of the food item ($\beta = 0.25$, $t = 10.60$, 95% confidence interval = [0.20, 0.29]); thus, the longer the name a food item had, the more expensive it was. To give an illustration of the magnitude ($\beta$) of the effect, for an increase from five characters to six characters, the price of the food item was expected to go up by 4.6%. Furthermore, when the three major food categories (i.e. dim sum, entrées and starches) were modelled separately, the effect persisted in all category-specific models ($\beta = [0.18, 0.31]$, $t > 4.7$).

This pilot study demonstrated that the language of Chinese menus may encode implicit information about the price of the food. The results echoed some of Jurafsky's (2014) findings for English menus, but also revealed some features specific to the context of the pilot study.

*Table 5.4* Food item categories and the total number of items in each category

| Category | Dim sum and appetizers | Barbecued and braised meats | Entrées | Soups | Starches (rice, noodles, etc.) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number | 2,012 | 215 | 1,699 | 184 | 1,617 |
| Category | Seafood | Hotpot | Meal set | Dessert | |
| Number | 274 | 52 | 123 | 298 | |

For instance, in Hong Kong, local Cantonese restaurants that provided English menus were much more expensive than those that did not. Moreover, restaurants that charged more for a meal overall tended to have longer dish names on the menus (as measured by the number of characters and punctuations in the name). Furthermore, the positive correlation between the length of dish names and dish prices held across the board, both across and within restaurants and in different food categories. By default, longer food names contained more linguistic content than shorter names, but what exactly was the information that could explain the higher prices? Was it the use of certain adjectives or long and rare words as Jurafsky (2014) found for English menus? Or was it the use of metaphors and idiomatic language, given the discussion above? Furthermore, were people sensitive to the implicit information in the food names? Could they guess the price of a dish based on its name? Lastly, given the linguistic diversity (and cuisine diversity) in China, are the observations in the pilot study generalizable to other parts of the country? These are all questions that have yet to be answered.

To summarize, this chapter introduced at least four different perspectives that one could pursue in the research of the language of food in Chinese. The study of food names may reveal the history of the global economy and language contact, inviting an interdisciplinary research approach informed by geohistory, anthropology and linguistics. The observations of semantic changes and polysemy in eating-related verbs call for more analysis in lexical semantics, and the abundance of food-related metaphors in Chinese idioms and proverbs provide an intriguing dataset for cognitive linguistic research. Last but not least, the fact that price information can be implicitly encoded in the language of menus raises interesting questions for computational linguists and psycholinguists. The discussion in this chapter should generate inspiration in what can be achieved in the future in this largely unchartered area of Chinese linguistic research.

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