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Abstract:	The paper examines the role of food ethics in everyday life from a semiotic perspective. By using a semiotic perspective a general model for analyzing the role of food ethical concerns in everyday life is proposed.

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Signs and Traces of Food Ethics in Everyday Life

*On comprend enfin que les espèces naturelles ne sont pas choisies parce que 'bonnes à manger' mais parce que 'bonnes à penser'*¹

For Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) the symbolic meanings of food meant that, in an anthropological context, food was a compelling point of entry for studies of how societies are structured. His argument was that by studying food cultures it was possible to learn more about societies and their culture than just by interviewing the members of these societies themselves.

Apart from this methodological approach, Lévi-Strauss's statement also reminds us that, from the perspective of everyday life, taste is not only about physiological attributes of the sense receptors on the tongue; taste is also constructed by, and dependent on, our thinking about food. If we appreciate a specific kind of food, this is not due to physiological taste alone; rather it is also because it is good to think about that kind of food.

On the other hand, if we do not like a specific kind of food, it might well be because we do not like the thought of it. An example of this concerns the meat of an animal's heart. Although this meat tends to have a rather neutral taste, many people dislike it, and link their dislike to the idea of eating the heart of a living being, something, which they find repulsive. The wider, cultural reasons for food dislikes may have religious, cultural, ethical, or political dimensions, or may derive from scientific knowledge, to name but a few of the possible influences involved in this matter. Food studies within disciplines such as ethnology, anthropology, sociology and philosophy, suggest that people think about food in many different ways. Food is part of culture, tradition, memory, pleasure, prestige, politics, exclusion and inclusion, place, safety, biotechnology, identity, care, medicine, gastronomy, trade, distinction, table manners, agriculture, public relations, nature, sex, shopping, innovation, logistics, science, cooking, globalisation, gifts, health – the list could be extended almost indefinitely! Food is central to life and, therefore, intrinsic to so many of its aspects.

The aim of this paper is to explore how food can be analysed in terms of signs and codes of everyday life, and especially how food can be used to express ethical concerns. After a brief description of the concept of food ethics,² the paper moves on to deal with how food can function as signs of relationships in everyday life, while building on the understanding that food ethics concern relational aspects of human existence. People judge foods in terms of quality and values, and food choice can for instance demonstrate care for others, recognition, ignorance, or disdain.

Finally, and on a theoretical level, the paper investigates how semiotics can be used to analyse the role of food in ethical relationships in daily life. In attempting to apply a semiotic approach to food, the following questions are relevant: How do foodstuffs function as signs of ethics in everyday life? How are foods used in order to send signals about ethics? And, how are signs of food ethics perceived?

¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le totémisme aujourd'hui*, Paris 1962, 132. In English Lévi-Strauss is often quoted for the phrase "Food is not only good to eat but also good to think". Although this quote is popular, I have not been able to find it in his works.

² The term *food ethics* appears first in Ben Mephram's book, *Food Ethics*, London 1996.

From Ethics to Food Ethics

Ethics are concerned with relationships. Ethics come into existence in the presence of the ‘other’, or as Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995) puts it: ‘We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics’.³ Thus the good life cannot *only* be my good life; it also includes that of others, since my good life is unthinkable without that of the ‘other’ – that is, his or her good life. Thus, I must also be able to imagine or ‘think’ about the good life of others, by putting myself in their position.

In short, ethics is about reasoning and judging, about rights and wrongs in relationships. Ethics only become an issue that needs attention if there is a chance of causing offence or harm to others. On this basis, food ethics can be seen as being concerned with avoiding harm and offence to others in the course of our dealings with food, consumption, and eating. C. Coff, M. Korthals and D. Barling have identified four major structural areas within the field of food ethics, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Areas of Food Ethics.⁴

Areas in Food Ethics
1. Food security deals with the just and fair supply of food to human beings. With more than 800 million starving or undernourished people in the world, this is probably the most pressing ethical question.
2. Food safety deals with the safety of the food: food should not endanger the health of consumers due to the presence of pathogens or pollution in the food. There are ongoing discussions about what is safe enough in relation to food, and whose definition of safety should be followed.
3. New developments in nutritional research and technology, such as personalised nutrition, functional foods, and health foods, challenge existing norms and values about food. This also includes food-related diseases such as obesity, cardio-vascular diseases and cancer, and their association with food culture, because they raise issues of responsibility and respect for ‘non-healthy’ life-styles and food-production methods.
4. Ethical questions raised by specific production practices and conditions in the food chain. This concerns animal welfare, the environment, sustainability, working conditions, the use of new (bio and nano) technology, research ethics, and so forth. These ethics relate to the production-history of food, that is, how, and under what conditions, it was produced.

Each of the four areas intrinsic to food ethics dealt with above can play a role in everyday life. Food security, for instance, may be an important concern for parents of young children. On a more mundane level, concerns about food security can come into play even when considering whether there will be enough food for everybody at dinner.

Food safety is, indeed, a matter of everyday concern for many people and, globally, much food legislation is enacted and implemented for the purposes of increasing food safety. The instances of contaminated milk powder in China in 2009 and of animal feed in Germany in 2011, are examples of how food safety can be jeopardised on a substantial scale. At a household level, concerns about food safety tend to relate to kitchen hygiene.

Nutritional research and the development of functional foods, raise many food ethical

³ Lévinas, E., *Totality and Eternity*, The Hague 1979, 43.

⁴ Coff, C., M. Korthals and D. Barling, ‘Ethical Traceability and Informed Food Choice’, in Coff, C., Korthals, M., Barling, D., Nielsen, T., (eds), *Ethical Traceability and Communicating Food*. Dordrecht 2008, 9.

issues in everyday life. If, for example, personalised diets based on functional foods become more widespread, the way in which we think about the common meal will definitely change.

Lastly, the production history of food plays a growing role in many societies as is evident from the increasing demand for food-production methods that are not only sustainable, but also friendly from both climatic and welfare points of view.⁵

Food ethics are applicable to many different situations and can range from the work of enlightened professionals, to end-users who may be uninformed about most issues relating to food ethics. In considering the everyday-life aspects of food ethics it is necessary to focus on the situations in which food ethics play a role: food ethics apply to relational situations in which people interact with food as a 'medium' and in which there is an element of concern for the other(s) involved. Some of these relational situations include:

- Shopping for food
- Cooking
- The common meal (with family, friends, community, network, business, in religious ceremonies etc.)
- Eating out

If these are situations in which food ethics can and often do play a role, then it is necessary to ask: *how* do food ethics play a role in these contexts, and for *whom* do they play a role? One approach to the study of these issues has been to investigate the areas of political and ethical consumption. Such studies ask who the ethical consumers are, and what their motives, means, and actions might be in this regard. While these studies form part of a reflexive and an everyday-consumption situation, they do not, however, entirely capture the *everyday* context and experience of people *interacting* while shopping, cooking for each other and eating together.

Food as a Sign of Relationship

Food has a vital metabolic function for all human beings. We may regard this indispensable position of food as being a major reason for the many meanings and uses of food, which we encounter in different cultures. Dietary rules are an example of how human beings attach meaning to food. Dietary rules prescribe specific eating habits and, thus, also specific forms of behaviour that are of importance, not only for cultural reasons, but also for an understanding of an individual's identity. The British anthropologist, Mary Douglas (1921-2007), wrote as follows about religious dietary rules:

... the dietary laws would have been like signs which at every turn inspired meditation on the oneness, purity and completeness of God. By rules of avoidance holiness was given a physical expression in every encounter with the animal kingdom and at every meal. Observance of the dietary rules would thus have been a meaningful part of the great liturgical act of recognition and worship, which culminated in the sacrifice in the Temple.⁶

Douglas here regards dietary laws as *signs* that inspire meditation. As food is usually consumed every day, it is essentially omnipresent and it is thus a very powerful sign that can remind us, on a daily basis, of our religion, cultural belonging, or personal identity. Food is an

⁵ See Coff, C., *The Taste for Ethics. An Ethic of Food Consumption*, Dordrecht 2006, for a more detailed description of food ethics.

⁶ Douglas, M., *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London 1966, 58.

‘item’ which, as a sign, can direct our thoughts in specific directions depending on our relationship to food.

What is indicated above is that food, through being a sign, functions in terms of relationships. As a sign, food represents something for someone. To give another illustration of this we can look at the writings of the German sociologist, George Simmel (1858-1918) on the sociology of the meal.⁷ According to Simmel, individuality is transgressed and elevated into community and social interaction during a shared meal. The social meal rejects egoism since the sharing of food binds individuals together in a community and in a form of common identity. In this way, the egoistical satisfying of hunger, the fundamental need for food, is ignored and food is shared instead. Thus, the common meal possesses the ability to establish solidarity and community feeling. In the common meal, we see how food becomes a sign of a positive relationship to other human beings, and a sign of friendship.

The English researcher, Leslie Goften, touches on food as a form of relationship when he writes that

food not only symbolises cultural values, but also forms a medium through which social relationships are expressed, from the intimate, face-to-face relations within the family, to the relations between regions and nations.⁸

Food is a medium through which relations – from close to global relations – between humans beings are expressed. We use food to express ourselves, to understand others, to convey our feelings, opinions, preferences, sense of belonging, ethical and political stands, and cultures. Food is also used as a means of communication; however, this form of communication is not necessarily verbalised as, in many cases, it is more likely to take place by means of non-verbalised signs and actions.

At this point we should remember that food is not restricted to social context but that it can also be understood in terms of a relationship to nature. Food originates ultimately from nature as it is based on living organisms (minerals being excluded, of course). What we eat is derived from selected parts of our surroundings – it may involve wild and/or domesticated animals or plants. For example, our eating habits mould landscapes through the environmental impacts of farming, and they also shape the working conditions in, and architectures of, the food sector in terms of industries and commerce. So, whether we like it or not, the way we eat establishes a relationship with nature, as well as with our immediate society, and with other people.

Since food functions in context, it is also part of the relational aspect between two or more parties. Since food is also a component of relationships it becomes part of ethics and of food ethics. The remainder of this paper will, therefore, investigate how the semiotic approach of the American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), can be used as a framework for conducting research on everyday-life interactions and relationships involving food ethics.

Signs of Food Ethics in Everyday Life

As I have already suggested, food and foodstuffs are signs, which we use for communication. We make use of foods and foodstuffs to send signals and messages to others and some of these messages contain codes of an ethical character. For example, giving (good) food to somebody is widely interpreted as a sign of care for that person. The denial of food to

⁷ Simmel, G., ‘Sociology of the Meal’, in Frisby D., Featherstone M., (ed.), *Simmel on Culture. Selected Writings*, London 1997, 130-5. First published in 1910.

⁸ Goften, L., ‘Bread to Biotechnology; Cultural Aspects of Food Ethics’, in Mephram, B., (ed.), *Food Ethics*, London 1966, 121-2.

somebody could be regarded, on the other hand, as a sign of ignorance and a lack of recognition of that person, or even as a deliberate attempt to harm him/her. Food can be likened to a language: we use it to communicate about ourselves, our concerns and attitudes, our intentions, and so forth. A dinner can communicate a variety of meanings, such as ‘we are in a hurry’, ‘I am tired’, ‘I love you’, ‘I am tired of you’, ‘animal welfare is important to me’, ‘biotechnology is not dangerous’, and so on. A meal may also serve as a finale to a business negotiation underlining the communal aspect of the project.

Health is another issue about which food communicates. As Anne-Lise Middelthon has demonstrated, the classification of food as either healthy or unhealthy is an ongoing concern of many societies today. In fact, she argues, that health considerations are fundamental to our attitudes to food today as feeding and eating are considered to foster either salvation or damnation.⁹

In order to explore the meanings of food from the semiotic perspective, we can look to the triadic model of Charles S. Peirce (1958). Amidst many definitions of signs in Peirce’s work, one of his more elaborate definitions is that a

sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity.¹⁰

Thus, we have three components in this understanding of sign: something – sign – somebody. Furthermore, ‘to stand for’ entails that information about some other thing be conveyed through the sign to somebody. The thing that the sign *represents* is called the *object* of the sign, or the *signified*,¹¹ and the ‘somebody’ is called the *interpretant*. Semiosis is the process in which the sign has a cognitive effect on its interpreter:¹²

Signified - Sign - Interpretant

Thus, according to Peirce, signs are not objects or material things as they only exist in the mind of the interpreter. A weathervane is only a sign of wind direction for someone who knows how weathervanes function. However, a weathervane is, of course, a material object, but the sign is not the same as the weathervane itself. The model in Fig. 1 illustrates the idea of applying the triadic model to the role of food in intersubjective relationships. On the left is Peirce’s general model for triadic relations and on the right is the model as it can be applied to food.



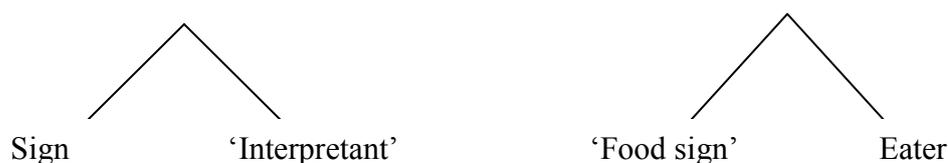


Fig. 1: The general triadic model (left) and the same model applied to the eating of food (right).

Following Peirce we can say that the *food sign* is not the food itself. The food sign only exist in the mind of the interpreter as the food functions as a sign to the *interpretant* for something else. This something else, called the *signified*, is what the food sign represents for the *interpretant* – in this case, the eater of food. The kind of object or signification to which the food refers depends on the *interpretant*. For a Westerner, then, a carrot may be a sign of health and may also be considered as a part of a healthy diet, whereas, for some African peasants, a carrot may signify low prestige food only eaten at times of severe food shortages. The same kind of food thus carries different meanings and values for different *interpretants*.

Furthermore, the interpretation of food signs depends on the situation or context in which food appears. Foodstuffs are interpreted and understood differently depending on whether the food is, for example, part of a meal, or constitutes a dish, or is presented in a food market or supermarket. A steak may be a sign of care when served for dinner, whereas the very same person may see the steak as a sign of animal cruelty when confronted with it in a supermarket.

The above model is a simple way of describing the relationship between food and a person in a triadic model. However, in everyday life, food and foodstuffs are constantly exchanged between people, and food is, as mentioned, an essential part of human relationships. Middelthon describes the relationship between feeder and eater when she states that the interaction between feeder and eater is not to be understood as a traditional dyadic model (feeder and eater) but that it should also include the food itself in an triadic model, which would then look like this¹³:

Supplier of food - Food itself - Receiver of food

In this triadic model, the supplier(s) of food might be producers, retailers, catering outlets, parents, families, friends, or those in social roles, such as a host. The receiver(s) of food might be friends, families, colleagues, customers or patients of the supplier. This model can also be thought of as depicting a way of relating to oneself, as an *I* incorporating food into a *me*, as Middelthon puts it, in which the supplier and receiver are the same person, but stand for different sides or identities of that person.¹⁴

The middle of the equation, the food itself, is indeed, and as Middelthon argues, ‘not a passive party to the meaning-making processes of eating and feeding, but a dynamic partner in this complex exchange’.¹⁵ Foodstuffs are carriers of meaning and of value. However,

¹³ Middelthon uses the terms ‘feeder’, the ‘food’, and ‘the one being fed’. For the purposes of this article, I have chosen to use the more neutral words ‘supplier of food’ and ‘receiver of food’, but the meaning is the same.

¹⁴ Middelthon, *op. cit.*, 2009, 218.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 219.

whatever the meaning or value we ascribe to a specific food, it is still something constructed by us, human beings. *We* give the food its meaning, and the meaning given can vary from person to person. For some people, food is only a form of nourishment, for others it represents the highest of pleasure. It can be both political and ethical in nature, and it can be associated with remembrance, and it can also provoke personal stories.

There is a long historical tradition, in both the Eastern countries of the world and in the so-called West, of thinking about food in terms of medicine and health. In the Western world, this tradition, in existence since at least the medieval period especially in monastic settings,¹⁶ has been largely overshadowed by the scientific concept of food in agricultural science and in food science, in which the focus is on food security, food safety and nourishment. Today, we are witnessing a revival of an understanding of food in terms of health and, for some people, food has acquired a functionality which is to be likened to that of medicine. This temporal shifting of focus concerning food's functionality shows that the current obsession with health is not to be likened to a natural law. Rather, it is a point of view concerning food that dominates current food-related discourses. Another example of such a temporal shift in perception of the value of food and its potential usefulness, is the ethical view of food: the ethical aspects that we ascribe to food today were much less important thirty years ago, which only underlines the fact, that meaning and value are ascribed to food, by people, over time and in different contexts..

This modest constructionist and 'postmodern' point of view concerning food that I am adopting here is in tune with the semiotic perspective. Foodstuffs become signs of meaning and value only when human beings ascribe meaning and value to them. Moreover, if by 'postmodern' we mean the loss of a common belief in progress and the loss of universal values or relativisation of values, then this point of view corresponds well with the present situation where many diverging and contradictory ideas about food coexist.

For the purpose of analysing food ethics in everyday life, I have already made the distinction between the supplier and the receiver of food. It may well be that a supplier of a food does not ascribe the same value to it as the receiver does (see Fig. 2 for a model of this difference). In Fig. 2, the food functions as one sign, which is interpreted differently by the supplier and receiver of food, thus generating *signified* 1 and 2.

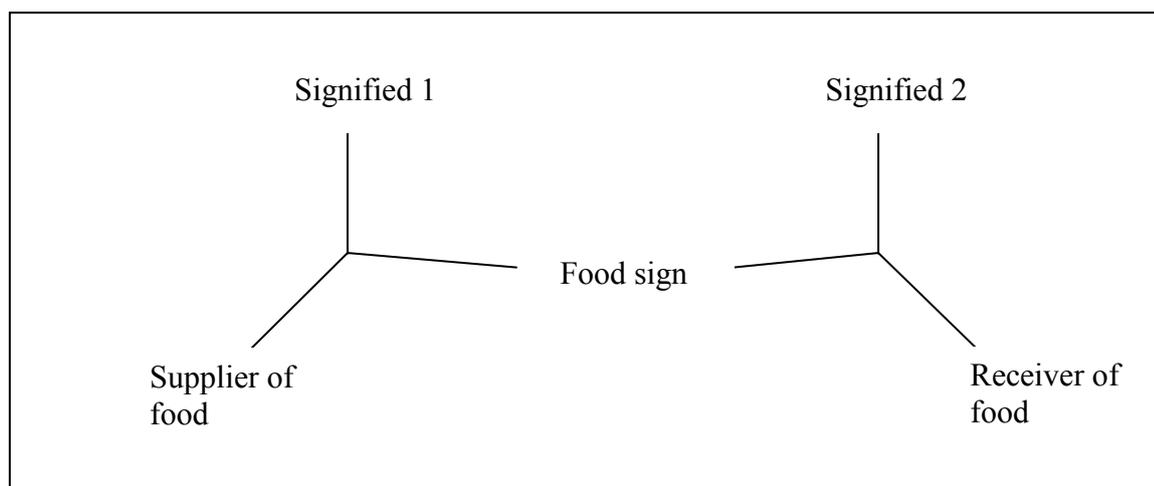


Figure 2: Double triadic model of a food.

¹⁶ Woolgar, C., 'Group Diets in Late Medieval England', in Woolgar, C.M., Serjeantson, D., Waldron, T., (eds.), *Food in Medieval England: Diet and Nutrition*, Oxford 2006, 191.

As I have argued above, food can be both communication and code, and can be likened to language. It is common knowledge that words, even between speakers of the same language, can have different meanings for different people, in different contexts, but less attention is paid to the fact that the same food can have different meanings and values for different people. As different individuals interact around food – for example, in the course of a common meal, in the selection of a restaurant, or when shopping for ingredients, contradictory meanings and values might be attributed by those individuals to the same foodstuffs. Such situations can lead to conflicts between people as well as to one person's own conflict with him/her-self. Food safety, nutritional values, ethics, and pleasure, may all be sources giving rise to different interpretation or perceptions, resulting in contradictions. To give but one example of this: Asian King Prawns are tasty and delicious, and they can be seen as a sign of affection and care when served for dinner. If, however, the receiver associates these prawns with environmental degradation and the exploitation of poor workers, then he/she may regard the food in a somewhat negative fashion. The supplier of food, the one who wants to make a delicious dinner, wishes to send a sign of care, but due to the different values associated with the very same foodstuff, the communication of that particular signification may fail. In this case, it can be noted that the interpretations derive from to different levels of time and space: the supplier of food is referring to the 'here and now' situation of the dinner, whereas the receiver is referring to past events in a distant place, namely the production history of the food.¹⁷

Food as a Sign of What?

The obscure nature of food codes reminds us that, in many respects, food offers only something like a trace of meaning. 'The special character of the trace', writes the French philosopher, Emmanuel Lévinas, 'is that it means something without revealing what it means'.¹⁸ The trace does not show what it refers to but leaves its meaning hidden, and, as such, the trace remains a mystery. According to Lévinas, the trace is distinguished from the sign in that it does not contain any intentionality; the trace does not intentionally *show* anything, it is signification without immediate reference to a meaning.

Foodstuffs are both sign and trace: they can function as a sign with a specific and well-defined meaning for somebody, but due to the vast number of values and meanings assigned to foodstuffs by different people, food also tends to acquire an enigmatic character in everyday life. Food is a sign, but we might ask, 'a sign of what?' Following Peirce we can say that, in the case of food as trace, its interpretation is unclear: traces are latent signs because they *can* be interpreted, but they do not *have* to be interpreted in the same way by different people. As a trace, the food itself does not reveal values and meanings; it is only the *interpretant* who can do that.

From the point of view of the semiotic approach, another reflexive layer should be added to the above model. This further layer appears when either a supplier or receiver of food performs an interpretation that originated with someone else, or with another group of people. Alternatively, this reflexivity can also be viewed at a personal level, when a person tries to analyse and interpret his/her own interpretations of food. Peirce has argued that one interpretation of a sign gives rise to a new, that is a second interpretation of the former interpretation, which then becomes a sign, and that there is an endless series of signs when a

¹⁷ See Coff, *op. cit.*, 2006, for a detailed description of the concept of production history.

¹⁸ Lévinas, Emmanuel, 'La trace de l'Autre.' ("The Trace of the Other"), in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, Paris 1963.

sign is understood.¹⁹ When analysing food ethics in everyday life, this reflexive element has to be taken into account, and in Fig. 3 below, a model of the serial nature of interpretation and renewal of signification is provided:

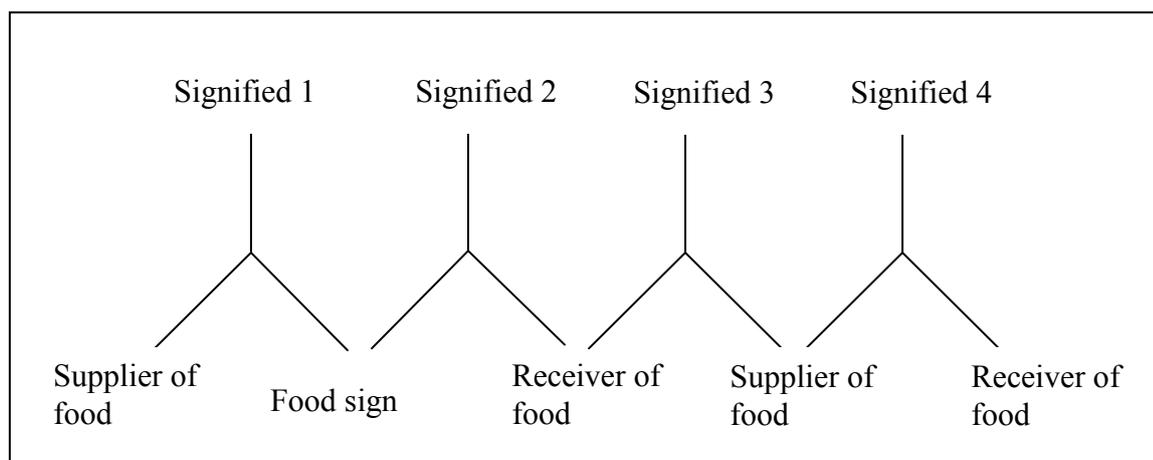


Fig. 3: Semiotic model of food illustrating the reflexive character of interpretation.

In Fig. 3, *Signified 1* designates the interpretation by the food supplier of the food in question, and *Signified 2* designates the interpretation of the food receiver. The interpretation of the receiver becomes a new sign, in this example for the supplier of food, which creates *Signified 3*, which is the supplier's interpretation of the receiver's interpretation. This is a common way of expressing care through food: "I give you food which I know you will appreciate it". The series of signs continues, and the receiver of food interprets the supplier's interpretation of the receiver's preferences for food, which is *Signified 4*.

The triadic semiotic model can thus be used as a conceptual model for gaining an understanding of how meaning and value are ascribed to food, and also for how these understandings come into play as a part of everyday interpersonal relations. The process of understanding food as signs of meanings and values in interpersonal relations, is a complex matter, due to the variety of interpretations, the different reflexive layers, and the many areas of life, in which food is involved.

In everyday life, people's relationship to food and the expression of their relationships to others, through food, oscillate between ignorance of the social meanings of food (the 'food as fuel' approach) and deliberate use of food to express meanings, values and care. In everyday life food is closely embedded in traditions, routines, habits, and social norms, which are largely taken for granted and which are, therefore, less obvious for the purposes of analysis. As a conceptual framework, the triadic model owes its analytical power to its ability to disclose some of the 'hidden' meanings and values ascribed to food by actors interacting with each other – for example, as suppliers and receivers of food.

¹⁹ Peirce, C. S., *Manuscripts*, Boston Mas. 1902, 599.