ARE WOMEN REALLY SWEET? AN ANALYSIS OF THE WOMAN AS DESSERT METAPHOR IN THE ENGLISH AND SPANISH WRITTEN PRESS*

Irene López Rodríguez Universidad de Extremadura irelopezrodriguez@hotmail.com

One of the most frequent metaphors used by the written media in both English and Spanish is the WOMAN AS DESSERT metaphor. Flicking through the pages of magazines and newspapers, one encounters a host of linguistic metaphors portraying women in the guise of honey, pie, cake, tart, bombón, pastel or bizcocho. Although at first sight these metaphors may be taken as compliments, an analysis of the assumptions that inform the use of such linguistic products reveals that, more often than not, these metaphors present women as objects of sexual desire.

Key words: metaphor, desserts, women, sexual desire, written media, English and Spanish.

Una de las metáforas más comunes utilizadas por la prensa escrita tanto en inglés como en español es la metáfora LA MUJER COMO POSTRE. Ojeando las páginas de periódicos y revistas, es frecuente encontrar un buen número de metáforas que presentan a la mujer como honey, pie, cake, tart, bombón, pastel o bizcocho. Aunque a primera vista dichos términos pueden parecer halagos, el análisis de las motivaciones que subyacen bajo estas metáforas revela que muy a menudo presentan a la mujer como objeto de deseo sexual.

Palabras clave: metáfora, postres, mujeres, deseo sexual, prensa escrita, inglés y español.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in the written media has received a great deal of attention and critics have analyzed several strategies used for the acculturation of women in the press. Cartoons portraying women as chatterboxes (Talbot, 2003), transitivity choices that endow women with the role of subservience (Vetterling-Braggin, 1981; Calvo, 1998), color associations that simply reinforce the stereotypical vision of the sexes (Calvo, 1998), discourse strategies that hinder women's participation in the text (Talbot, 1995) and metaphorical identifications that convey sexist beliefs about the role of women (Baker, 1981; Mills, 1995) are part and parcel of both the English and Spanish press.

One of the most frequent metaphors used by the written media in English and Spanish equates women with edible substances. The WOMAN AS FOOD metaphor presents women in the guise of meat products (rib, jamona), seafood (fish, gamba), fruits and vegetables (peach, melocotoncito) and sweets (candy, bombón). This paper looks at a particular metaphorical instantiation within the WOMAN AS FOOD metaphor, namely, the WOMAN AS DESSERT metaphor (Hines, 1999). Flicking through the pages of magazines and newspapers in English and Spanish, one finds a host of repeated linguistic metaphors portraying women as tarts, cookies, candy, bombones, pastelitos and bizcochitos. Despite the fact that at first sight these terms may be taken as compliments, as the following pages will try to show, these linguistic metaphors, more often than not, present women as objects of sexual desire.

This paper examines a corpus of linguistic metaphors extracted from popular publications in English and Spanish in which women are linguistically presented in the guise of sweets. The first section offers a general overview about the biological, historical, anthropological and religious grounds which might have motivated the associations between women with food. The second part carries out a cross-linguistic study by analyzing a repetoire of linguistic metaphors falling within the scope of the WOMEN ARE DESSERTS metaphor in English and Spanish. This is finally followed by a conclusion which recapitulates the main ideas reached in this study.

2. WOMEN AS FOOD

The associations of women and food can be traced back almost to the dawn of times (see Charles & Kerr, 1988; Curting & Heldke, 1992). Biological functions such as breastfeeding, traditional views confining women to the domestic sphere and folk beliefs of the type The way to a man's heart is through his stomach, A woman's place is barefoot, pregnant, and in the kitchen, Busca mujer que sepa guisar y coser or La mujer y la sartén en la cocina bien estén seem to support this view (Wilkinson, 2002). Hence, it is not surprising to find in both English and Spanish a great many linguistic expressions establishing such a connection: she is a prime rib, la chica está como un queso, that girl is a bit of a jam or es la típica chica gamba are just a few illustrations of metaphorical usages of food applied to women.

In addition to the nurturing role biologically and historically assigned to women, the representation of the desired person in general as food metaphor may also have anthropological and cultural roots (Harris, 1985; Adams, 1990). In fact, the practice of cannibalism has been (and still is) a common ritual among certain tribes. It is not uncommon for some cultures to eat close family members and sexual partners out of love and respect and enemies in the hope of obtaining their strength, wisdom and power. The folklore tradition is also rife with myths and legends of people eating their rivals and beloved ones, and even some religions have a symbolic practice of cannibalism as part of their liturgy, a clear example being the Catholic dogma, where bread and wine are transubstantiated into the real flesh and blood of Jesus, which are then distributed (i.e. drunk and eaten) by the faithful.

This correlation between eating and human desire (be it wisdom, power, love or sex) seems to vertebrate the generic metaphor DESIRE IS HUNGER (Lakoff, 1987; Kövecses, 2002; Gibbs et al., 2004) by means of which desire is understood as hunger for food and, consequently, the object of desire is represented as food. Speakers of both English and Spanish frequently structure their experiences of desire in terms of hunger. So, for instance, desire for revenge is understood as thirst for revengelsed de venganza, for wealth as hunger for wealth/hambre de riqueza, for knowledge as thirst for knowledge/sed de conocimiento or for sex as drool over someone/babear por alguien.

Indeed, it appears that feeling hungry and eating are commonly used to express sexual desire, sexual satisfaction and to evaluate the potential of a sexual partner in many languages (Emanatian, 1995; Gibbs et al., 2004; Baider & Gesuato, 2005). This is true for English and Spanish where speakers often resort to the food domain to talk about the sexual desirability of a woman. Virtually all foodstuffs become sources for the representation of women. For example, meat products give way to rib and jamona to refer to a man's partner or wife and to a curvy woman, respectively, the former being based on the biblical story of the Genesis and the latter on the shape of a ham. Seafood has generated *fish* to denote an ugly woman, probably because of the associations between the bad smell of the animal and the female genitalia, and *gamba* to refer to a woman who has an attractive body but whose face is ugly on the grounds that the head of a prawn tends to be removed to eat the body. Fruits and vegetables produce peach and melocotoncito for beautiful young women probably because fruits, like vegetables, easily get ripe. Finally, from the domain of desserts pie and bombón are applied to attractive women, maybe due to the connotations of sweetness (Partridge, 1970b; Carbonell, 1997).

However, although practically all edible substances are used in the conceptualization of women, the sweet group is perhaps the most prolific one (Hughes, 1991; Hines, 1999; Chamizo & Sánchez, 2000). In fact, on very few occasions are women portrayed as heavier or more consistent foods, as are fish and meat. So a woman can be called *sweetie pie, candy* or *cookie*, but more substantive and heavier foods tend to be reserved for men (Adams, 1990). For example, in English, attractive women have long been known as *cheesecake*. Yet, when it is the man the attractive one the *cake* remains in the identification but a more nutritious and consistent ingredient is chosen: *beefcake* (Nilsen, 1994). Something similar applies to Spanish, where sweet products are more commonly used for women than for men (Moore, 1996). Thus, although in theory the figurative use of most sweets is ambisexual in application, it would sound strange to call a man *bizcochito* or *pastelito* (Noble & Lacasa, 1992).

Hence, within the field of foodstuffs, the choice of food selected may also have important implications for the metaphorical identification of women with desserts. Certainly, the connotations of sweetness that stem from desserts might correspond with the cultural stereotype that associates women with loving and tender creatures (Hines, 1999). Moreover, the fact that most desserts tend to have a soft, spongy texture might also hint at the cultural stereotype that links men with strong and tough personalities as opposed to the mild and gentle ones of women (Adams, 1990).

In addition to this, from a nutritional standpoint, desserts do not have the nourishing value of other types of foods such as fish, fruit, vegetables or meat. In fact, desserts are not essential in our diets, in other words, they can be done without. Therefore, one of the main assumptions underlying the metaphorical identification of women with sweet foodstuffs might be unimportance (Hines, 1999).

The following section will concentrate on examining several examples taken from the written press in both English and Spanish in which women are presented in the guise of sweets.

3. WOMEN AS DESSERTS

One of the most common metaphors used to refer to a woman in both English and Spanish is The WOMAN AS DESSERT metaphor, manifested in common linguistic expressions such as tart, cheesecake or bombón. The origin of this metaphor seems to stem from the PEOPLE ARE OBJECTS metaphor, in which human beings are equated with different types of inanimate entities such as machines (e.g. I'm a little rusty today/Es una auténtica máquina en matemáticas), buildings (e.g. Eyes are windows to the soul/Me abrió la puerta de su corazón), tools (e.g. He is not the sharpest tool in the shed/Está hecho un hacha), clothes (e.g. He is a wet blanket/Es un manta), etc. This metaphor, in turn, coalesces with the cultural stereotype "women are sweet" and with the metaphor ACHIEVING A DESIRED OBJECT IS GETTING SOMETHING TO EAT (e.g. She tasted victory/ Está saboreando las mieles del éxito), giving birth to the metaphor under discussion: WOMEN ARE SWEET OBJECTS or simply WOMEN ARE DESSERTS (see Hines 1999: 47).

Perhaps, the most common sweet substance with which women are identified in the press is *honey*. The term of endearment par

excellence, *honey* denotes a viscid sweet liquid, but at the same time conjures the image of bees flying around, stickiness and even attraction. This sense of magnetism seems to be exploited by the press to portray women as a kind of magnet, as a substance that is tempting and invites attraction.

- (1) Remember, sexy isn't necessarily skimpy-it's about making the best of what you've got in clothes you feel good wearing. Work it, **honey**! (*CosmoGirl*, Sep. 2003, p. 77).
- (2) Okay, so exactly how do you become one of those women who know that they're sex goddesses? **Honey**, it's simple: Just moving, talking and thinking in a slightly more erotically charged way is all it takes to feel spectacularly sexy. (http://magazines.ivillage.com/redbook/sex/turn/articles/0,,284443_566492,00.html 4/11/05).
- (3) Plenty under \$20. Look the money, honey! (CosmoGirl, April 2004, p. 3).

Other substances also falling into the category of desserts are *pie*, *cake* and *tart*. Along with the connotations of sweetness, all these foodstuffs tend to be decorated in some way (i.e. creams, jelly, icing, etc.) to make them visually more appetizing, just as women use makeup to improve their outward appearance, which reminds one that another word for *make up* is *frosting* and *to tart up* is *to dress up* (Eble, 1996). This visual component of desserts tends to be used to refer to attractive women.

- (4) She is a cutie **pie** (*CosmoGirl*, Aug. 2003, p. 3).
- (5) Be a cutie **pie** (*CosmoGirl*, Aug. 2003, p. 3).
- (6) Cool and trendy girls...become a **cheesecake** (*CosmoGirl*, Aug. 2003, p. 2).
- (7) Wasn't Jenny Guidroz the town **tart** in high school? (*Vanity Fair*, Jan. 2004, p. 78).

Another important aspect of the ideological underpinning of the metaphorical identification of women with *pies, cakes* and *tarts* is the fact that these terms present women as juicy desserts made to be cut and shared. Hence, by presenting women as a separate or detached portion, as a fragment of anything, they are being deprived of their uniqueness because, after all, a piece of cake is exactly the same as another piece of cake (Hines, 1999). This distinction between mass and count nouns might well hint at the idea of availability and promiscuity. Indeed, a portion of something is always easier to grab and, at the same time, it is not filling enough, that is, one might be willing to have another serving. As a matter of fact, the very words *pie*, *piece* and *cake* carry the suggestions of promiscuity, availability and easiness. Common idiomatic expressions which spring to one's mind are *a piece of cake* or *easy as pie*. Although apparently innocent in use, these expressions are connected to gender.ⁱⁱ

The consideration of women as pieces of sweets, then, seems to convey sexual overtones; the act of cutting and slicing running parallel to phallic imagery, as the following expressions bear witness to: *cut the cake* (to deflower a virgin), *shake a tart* (have sex with a woman), *cut a side/slice* (have sexual intercourse), among many others (see Hines, 1999; Chamizo & Sánchez, 2000). In fact, sexual activities are often wrapped up in the guise of sweets and *cakeshop* and *tartshop* are euphemisms for a brothel in Australian English and British English respectively (Partridge, 1970b; Lighter, 1994; Hines, 1999).

Likewise, the idea of availability is glaringly obvious in the choice of sweet snacks such as *cookies* or *candy* to represent females. Indeed, the identification of women not only with sweets but also with snacks has important implications because a snack is a small meal usually eaten in a hurry between main meals to satiate one's appetite. This notion of lack of importance (i.e. within the food domain snacks are not proper meals) goes hand in hand with scarcity of time, and, as seen in the following excerpts, the figurative use of *cookie* and *candy* applies to women with whom the relationship is neither serious nor intended to last for a long period of time.

(8) Check out Clooney's new **cookie**! (*Star*, May 2004, p. 15).

- (9) A new **cookie** for your ex-boyfriend! (*Nineteen*, Feb. 1999).
- (10) Matthew Perry may have dated the likes of Julia Roberts in the past but, these days, he's opting for more anonymous **arm candy**. The 32-year-old actor has been dating make-up artist Andi O'Reilly (*Cosmopolitan*, June 2002, p. 75).
- (11) Did you know? Back when she was growing up in West Virginia, *Alias* star and current Ben Affleck **arm candy** Jennifer Garner had more sax appeal than sex appeal: She was a self-proclaimed geek who played saxophone in her high school's marching band. (*Cosmopolitan*, May 2005, p. 288).
- (12) A lot of guys choose women who are "arm candy" good-looking trophy girlfriends who bolster their status among other men or counteract their own insecurities. (http://www.cosmopolitan.com, 7/11/2006).

Moreover, it is interesting to notice how women, apart from being reduced to sweet snacks, are disembodied through the metonymic use of *arm* to stand for the whole person. Certainly, the body part selected to represent women is significant for, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 36) point out, the main function of synecdoche is "not just to see a part stand for the whole person but rather to pick up a particular characteristic of the person." Interestingly, women are not thought of as *heads*, *brains* or *hands* since these body parts suggest intelligence and skill. On the contrary, women are depicted as *arms* probably because of the image of couples holding hands and grabbing each other's arms.

A less consistent dessert is the pudding. Puddings, in fact, have a soft, spongy texture, which makes them more vulnerable to pressure. It is this soft consistency that motivates its metaphoric usage since the term is applied to fat women. Here, the visual element of a pudding, that is, its shaky appearance, certainly runs parallel to the flab of a woman. Thus, Arianna Huffington, who is plump, is referred

to as a Greek Pudding (New Yorker, April 13, 1998, p. 40). iii

In like manner, ingredients commonly used in the elaboration of sweets are prone to become metaphors to identify women in these magazines. Consider, for example, the description of women as *sugar babes* (*Daily Mail*, 7th May, 2006) or actress Goldie Hawn as *puff pastry* (*Vanity Fair*, Jan. 1997, p. 118). In fact, it appears that the sexual maturation of a woman is seen from a culinary point of view, that is, when the woman is young (i.e. not sexually mature), she is presented as ingredients. Then, the state of pregnancy is conceived of as *having a bun in the oven* (13), whereas the process of sexual maturation is seen in terms of cooking (14).^{iv}

Does Nicole Kidman have a "bun in the oven"? That is the question being raised everywhere. It wouldn't be all that surprising, since she recently wed country singing start Keith Urban (www.starmagazine.com 1/22/2007).

From MTV **tartlet** to art-house **pastry** du jour. No wonder the adoring critics who **droolingly** dub her "luminous" are so eager to **gobble** Liv Tyler up. You can almost **sniff** a **just-from-the-oven freshness** about her as she strides into the room (*USA Today*, quoted in *The New Yorker*, July 15, 1996, p. 84).

As has been seen, the metaphorical identification of women with sweets has caught on in the English press to such an extent that it has generated a whole network of spin-offs. So young women are presented as ingredients (pastry, sugar, honey) that will produce cheesecakes, tarts or cakes when the woman is beautiful and sexually mature, puddings if the woman is plump, sweet snacks (candy, cookie) when the relationship with the woman is neither long nor serious and whose beauty can be sniffed and taken from the oven. Figure 1 below illustrates the metaphorical network of the WOMEN AS DESSERT metaphor in the English press.

Metaphorical network: DESSERTS

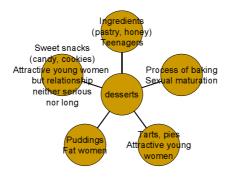


Figure 1. The metaphorical network WOMEN ARE DESSERTS in English

Similarly, in the Spanish-speaking world, the written press is also rife with images of women in the guise of desserts. Common desserts include *bombón*, *bizcocho* and *pastel* (Carbonell, 1997).

One of the most recurring metaphors used for the representation of women in the press is bombón. Generally applied to attractive women, as seen in extracts (15), (16), (17) and (18), bombones are small pieces of chocolate usually sold in boxes containing a wide selection of them. Thus, in addition to the connotations of sweetness, size as well as the way they are presented when sold might prompt its figurative usage. In fact, as has been seen, it is not uncommon to find portravals of women as pieces, fragments or small portions, with the resulting negative import attached to them. Obviously, if sexual desire is understood in terms of hunger, one's appetite is not likely to be satiated with just one piece of chocolate, but rather with a few of them. This idea of availability which seems to underlie most figurative usages of sweets can be seen in extract (19) in which a journalist describes the state of uncertainty of a tycoon, who is in two minds about dating one woman or another and in extract (20) in which the touristic attractions of Brazil include a large number of beautiful women on the beach which are conceptualized as bombones.

- (15) Con esa minifalda Esther Cañadas está hecha todo un **bombón**. (*Ragazza*, Jan. 1999, p. 56).
- (16) Si quieres ser un **bombón**, sigue los siguientes trucos... (*Vanidades*, March 2000, p. 14).
- (17) Haz que a tu chico se le haga la boca agua. Ponte tu vestido más sexy, escote y maquillaje...ino podrá resistir semejante **bombón**! (*Ragazza*, June 1996, p. 38).
- (18) Hoy también comenzará el interrogatorio de las otras cuatro procesadas. El letrado de una de ellas, el ex diputado Jaume Nualart, ha pedido que su patrocinada ingrese en un centro para desintoxicación de drogadictos. Ayer estaba hecha una ruina. Quienes la han visto en las cintas, grabadas hace cinco años, aseguran que "era un **bombón** de mujer" (*La Vanguardia*, 10th March, 1994).

Heidi o Naomi...¿con qué **bombón** se quedará el maduro seductor? (*Vanidades*, July 2000).

(20) Uno no tiene más que tumbarse en una hamaca en una de las playas de Brasil y ver a un sinfín de **bombones** desfilar (*People*, May 2004).

Another type of chocolate used by the press in Spanish is *huevo de chocolate* (chocolate egg), which is a type of chocolate usually filled with cream or with a small toy inside. Like in the previous case of *bombón*, the metaphoric usage of the chocolate egg echoes the idea of sweetness, attraction and availability. However, unlike the case of *bombón*, the chocolate egg is not only bigger, but it usually contains something inside. It is likely that the filling or little present contained in the chocolate egg has motivated its figurative usage, for, as seen in excerpts (21) and (22), *huevo de chocolate* denotes an attractive woman who is pregnant. Obviouly, the figurative use is based on visual grounds, that is, the state of pregnancy of a woman runs parallel to the shape of the type of chocolate and the baby in the womb is likened to the filling or toy inside the egg.

- (21) A pesar de su avanzado estado, la bella presentadora está hecha todo un **huevo de chocolate** (*Vanidades*, May 2004).
- (22) Sigue siendo sexy con su incipiente tripita...todo un huevito de chocolate (*People*, June 2004).

As far as pastel and bizcocho are concerned, the figurative uses of these types of cakes are generally applied to attractive women. This idea of physical attraction seems to be motivated by the visual presentation of most cakes, which tend to be decorated to enhance their outward appearance in order to make them more appetizing. Moreover, like their English counterparts pie and cake, the idea of physical attraction might go hand in hand with (sexual) availability. In fact, as already mentioned, the portrayal of women as desserts made to be cut and shared may suggest, on the one hand, the idea of deprivation of uniqueness, because if a slice of cake is exactly the same as another slice of cake, then, the idea that a woman is very much like any other woman is being conveyed, and, on the other hand, availability, because from the point of view of satiating one's appetite a slice may not be enough. Interestingly, these ideas of availability and deprivation of uniquesness are brought to the fore in Spanish with the use of the diminutive form –ito (i.e. huevito, pastelito, bizcochito), which, apart from conveying affection, indicates small size.

Excerpts (23) and (24) present young marriageable girls in the guise of *pastelito*. The youth and beauty of the woman run parallel to the presentation of a cake whereas the state of being single is metaphorically signalled with a dessert in a bakery exposed to be sold and eaten. Likewise, extract (25) conceptualizes an attractive female who has just broken up with her boyfriend (i.e. she is again "available") as *bizcochito*.

- (23) Pero, el viejo cela más a su hija Rosela, de 18 abriles, que a su vieja mujer. Y es que, como muchos papacitos, tiene sus esperanzas de volverse rico, depositadas en el **pastelito**. (*C.R.E.A*).
- (24) Polidoro jura que nunca más se juntará con mujer

con hijos de otro, porque casi siempre son malagradecidas. Buscará una que sea señorita, para comenzar a tener familia con ella, y los que lo escuchan se ríen, porque saben lo difícil que será para un feúcho como Polidoro conseguir un **pastelito** (*C.R.E.A.*).

(25) Parece que se acabó lo que se daba entre Rebeca y su el millonario venezolano. El **bizcochito** aparecía sin su chico en la inauguración de la tienda. (*Vanidades*, June 2004).

Like in English, the metaphor WOMEN AS DESSERTS has become so successful in the Spanish language that it has generated a metaphorical network. So young women are presented as different types of sweets (bombón, pastel, bizcocho) who take on the role of bakers (pastelera) to generate children and whose physical appearance when pregnant resembles a chocolate egg (huevo de chocolate). Figure 2 schematizes the metaphorical network generated by the WOMAN AS DESSERT metaphor in the Spanish press.

(26) La mamacita tuvo que ser **pastelera** para hacer semejante **bomboncito** (*Vanidades*, May 2001)

Metaphorical network: DESSERTS



Figure 2. The metaphorical network WOMEN ARE DESSERTS in Spanish

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has looked at a common metaphor used by the written press in both English and Spanish in the representation of women, namely, the WOMAN AS DESSERT metaphor. The pages of magazines and newspapers in English and Spanish are rife with images of women in the guise of different types of sweet foodstuffs such as *honey*, *pie*, *cookie*, *candy*, *bombón*, *pastel* or *bizcocho*. This association of women with foods may stem from cultural, historical and anthropological roots. In fact, as has been seen, the nurturing role biologically and historically attributed to women, community practices of cannibalism and symbolic rituals in which the desired person is eaten may have motivated the metaphorical identification of females with edible substances.

Both the English and Spanish press often resort to sweet foodstuffs in order to talk about the sexual desirability of a woman. Certainly, the choice of food seems to have important implications because from a nutritional standpoint desserts lack the nutritional value of other foodstuffs such as meat, fish, fruits or vegetables. In addition to this, as has been seen, together with the connotations of sweetness and tenderness that stem from desserts, the idea of deprivation of uniqueness and availability might underline such figurative usages. Finally, the fact that the metaphorical identification of women as desserts has become so ingrained in the English and Spanish press is well attested not only in their widespread usage and acceptance but also in the metaphorical networks created by such metaphors.

NOTES

- ¹ The magazines and newspapers used for this study are *Cosmo Girl*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Vanity Fair*, *Star*, *Nineteen*, *New Yorker*, *Daily Mail*, *USA Today*, *Ragazza*, *Vanidades*, *La Vanguardia*, *People* and magazines taken from the *CREA* (Corpus de la Real Academia del Español Actual).
- ² Some of the senses registered for *cake* are "a prostitute" (Partridge, 1949), "a young woman" (Lighter, 1994) and "a woman's breasts" (Lighter, 1994). *Piece* is also defined as "a woman or a girl" (Partridge, 1970b) and "a woman thought of as an object

of sexual intercourse; intercourse itself" (Oxford English Dictionary). Piece is also defined as "a term of vulgar and luscious endearment for a woman" (Partridge, 1993), "easy, simple, desirable, welcome" (Partridge, 1970a) and "something easily achieved" (Oxford English Dictionary).

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³ I am indebted to Hines (1999) for this example.

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