



ETYMOLOGY AND SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF THE NAMES OF FAMOUS ITALIAN DISHES

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Abstract

This article examines the etymology and semantics of the names of well-known Italian dishes, revealing their role as cultural markers and symbols of national identity. The study combines linguistic, historical, and cultural analyses to explore how historical events, regional traditions, and social transformations influenced the formation of gastronomic terms such as *pizza*, *pasta*, *lasagna*, *tiramisù*, and *carbonara*. The research highlights that these names, in addition to their nominative function, carry deep cultural meanings, reflecting the social and historical realities of different periods in Italian history. The findings may be useful in linguocultural studies, translation theory, and the promotion of national culinary heritage in the context of globalization.

Keywords: Italian cuisine, gastronomic vocabulary, etymology, semantics, national identity, culture, food terminology, culinary culture.

INTRODUCTION

In modern linguistics and cultural studies, there is a growing interest in the study of gastronomic vocabulary as a reflection of national identity and cultural traditions. Italian cuisine, known for its diversity and rich history, occupies a special place in this context. The names of dishes such as *pizza*, *pasta*, *lasagna*, and *tiramisu* have become internationally recognized and are widely used in many languages around the world. However, behind these seemingly simple terms lie deep historical roots and cultural meanings that have developed over the centuries.

The relevance of this research stems from the need for a deeper understanding of how historical events, cultural exchanges, and linguistic processes have influenced the formation and evolution of the names of key Italian dishes. Exploring the etymology and semantics of these names not only allows us to trace their linguistic development but also to identify the cultural and social factors that contributed to their spread and adaptation in various linguistic and cultural environments.





The aim of this study is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the origins and semantic features of the names of the most well-known Italian dishes, with a particular focus on their historical and cultural context and the processes of adaptation in other languages.

The scientific novelty of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of gastronomic vocabulary, combining methods of linguistics, cultural studies, and history. Particular attention is paid not only to linguistic aspects but also to the cultural contexts in which the names of dishes were formed and transformed, as well as their role in intercultural communication.

Thus, this study is aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of how historical, cultural, and linguistic factors contributed to the formation and evolution of the names of famous Italian dishes, as well as at identifying the specific features of their perception and adaptation in different cultural contexts.

METHODS

To achieve the objectives of the research and to address the set tasks, a comprehensive approach was applied, combining methods of linguistic and cultural analysis. The main stages and methods of the research included:

1. **Collection and selection of lexical material.** At the initial stage, the names of well-known Italian dishes, such as pizza, pasta, lasagna, tiramisu, and carbonara, were collected. The sources for this stage included cookbooks, specialized dictionaries, and online resources dedicated to Italian cuisine.
2. **Etymological analysis.** To determine the origins and historical development of the dish names, etymological dictionaries and academic articles were used. Special attention was given to the *Dizionario Etimologico della Lingua Italiana*, which provides a detailed examination of the origins of many Italian gastronomic terms.
3. **Semantic analysis.** The meanings and semantic changes of the dish names were studied using componential analysis and the analysis of dictionary definitions. Various contexts in which these terms are used were examined to identify their semantic characteristics and evolution.
4. **Cultural analysis.** To understand the cultural and historical factors influencing the formation of the dish names, works on the history of Italian cuisine and gastronomic culture were consulted. In particular, the book *Italian Cuisine: A*





Cultural History was used, as it describes the development of Italian gastronomy in the context of cultural and social changes.

The application of these methods made it possible to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the etymology and semantics of the names of well-known Italian dishes, taking into account their historical development, cultural specifics, and processes of adaptation.

RESULTS

The analysis of the names of the most well-known Italian dishes shows that each gastronomic term conveys not only information about the composition or preparation method, but also reflects the historical, social, and cultural realities of various periods in Italian history.

Etymological and cultural-historical analysis of names:

Pizza

The word “pizza” is mentioned as early as the 10th century in documents from the southern Italian region of Campania. Its etymology remains debated, with the most accepted versions being:

1. From the Late Latin *pinsa*, meaning “to press, to flatten”, which reflects the technique of manually stretching the dough.¹
2. From the Lombard *bizzo*, meaning “a piece”, emphasizing the simplicity and accessibility of a food meant to be eaten by hand.²

Historically, pizza is closely linked to Neapolitan folk cuisine, where it served as an inexpensive and quick meal for workers and peasants. However, as Italy's culinary culture developed, pizza acquired symbolic significance: it became not just food, but a symbol of regional pride and cultural unity.³ A crucial moment was the creation of “Pizza Margherita” in 1889 in honor of Queen Margherita of Savoy, solidifying pizza's place as part of Italy's national identity.⁴

Pasta

The term "pasta" traces back to the Latin *pasta*, which in turn derives from the Greek

¹ Cortelazzo, M., & Zolli, P. (1999). *Dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana*. Zanichelli.

² <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/cucina-italiana/>

³ Montanari, M. (2006). *Food is culture*. Columbia University Press.

⁴ Capatti, A., & Montanari, M. (2003). *Italian cuisine: A cultural history*. Columbia University Press.





πάσθη, meaning “dough” or “a mixture”.⁵ Pasta is one of the oldest culinary categories in Italy, with references to boiled dough appearing in ancient Roman treatises.

Semantically, pasta occupies a special place in Italian culture: it is not just a dish, but a symbol of the family table, shared meals, and cultural continuity. In central and southern Italy, pasta is seen as a daily staple, while in the north, it is often associated with festive traditions. Over time, the word “pasta” acquired symbolic meaning, representing simplicity, accessibility, and the joy of communal meals.

Lasagna

The name “lasagna” originates from the Latin *lasanum*, which referred to a cooking pot.⁶ Over time, the term shifted to denote the dish prepared in such a pot. This transition demonstrates a typical metonymic process in culinary vocabulary, where the name of the container becomes the name of its contents.

Lasagna is particularly characteristic of the Emilia-Romagna region. In Bologna, the classic version with meat ragù and béchamel sauce was developed. Lasagna symbolizes home comfort, family celebrations, and festive meals for large gatherings. Interestingly, the word itself came to reflect the idea of layering and variety, which corresponds with the cultural diversity of Italy as a whole.

Tiramisù

The name “tiramisù” appeared relatively recently — in the 1960s, in the Veneto region. Its etymology is transparent: *tirami su* literally means “lift me up”.⁷ However, this simple phrase carries multilayered semantics. On the one hand, the name refers to the physical effect of caffeine and sugar, which energize and invigorate. On the other hand, it evokes lightness, effortless pleasure, and even flirtation — the dessert is often associated with romantic dinners and a relaxed, carefree atmosphere.⁸

The term “tiramisù” is also actively exploited in advertising texts, where its meaning extends to a metaphor for “lifting one’s mood.” In this sense, the name transcends the boundaries of gastronomic vocabulary, becoming part of a broader cultural discourse.

Carbonara

The name “carbonara” is traditionally linked to charcoal burners (*carbonari*) who are

⁵ Cortelazzo, M., & Zolli, P. (1999). *Dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana*. Zanichelli.

⁶ Montanari, M. (2006). *Food is culture*. Columbia University Press.

⁷ Gambero Rosso. (2023). *Tiramisù: storia, origine e curiosità sul dolce più amato al mondo*. Gambero Rosso.

⁸ Montanari, M. (2006). *Food is culture*. Columbia University Press.





said to have created this simple, hearty dish of pasta, eggs, cheese, and bacon while working in the Apennine Mountains.⁹ This connection with charcoal workers is reflected not only in the name, but also in the dish's character — it emphasizes the value of simple, high-quality ingredients.

An alternative etymology links the name to black pepper, sprinkled on top of the dish, resembling specks of coal dust. In either case, carbonara preserves the symbolism of honest, rustic cuisine, which competes on equal footing with refined restaurant dishes.

Italian gastronomic terms do not merely designate dishes — they also perform important cultural functions. They:

1. Mark regional identity (pizza as a symbol of Campania, lasagna as a symbol of Emilia-Romagna);
2. Convey national values, such as simplicity, hospitality, and the cult of home cooking;
3. Create a particular emotional coloring, with tiramisù representing lightness and joy.

Thus, the names of Italian dishes represent not just lexical units, but full-fledged cultural symbols that actively contribute to shaping Italy's image in the global cultural space.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the names of popular Italian dishes demonstrates that gastronomic vocabulary is not merely a part of the language, but an important link within the broader system of national culture, reflecting historical and social processes, values, and the worldview of the Italian people.

Etymological analysis revealed that a significant portion of dish names can be traced back to Latin and Greek roots, which confirms the continuity of Italy's gastronomic culture since antiquity. However, the formation of modern names was influenced not only by Latin and Greek, but also by regional dialects, which preserved and enriched the lexical inventory during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

⁹ Capatti, A., & Montanari, M. (2003). *Italian cuisine: A cultural history*. Columbia University Press.





The history behind the emergence and consolidation of certain names, such as *pizza*, *lasagna*, and *carbonara*, highlights the close connection between culinary tradition and the socio-economic structure of various Italian regions. For example, *pizza*, as a symbol of Campania, emerged within the context of urban poverty; *lasagna* became associated with festive cuisine in Emilia-Romagna; and *carbonara* reflects the realities of rural labor in the Apennines. Thus, each name encodes not only the ingredients or preparation method of the dish but also a whole layer of social and historical realities.

At the semantic level, the names of Italian dishes exhibit a multilayered structure. These names include:

- Denotative level — the direct reference to a specific dish (for example, *pasta* as a general term for pasta products).
- Cultural level — references to historical events, regional traditions, or cultural symbols (such as *Pizza Margherita*, which symbolizes Italian national unity).
- Emotional and evaluative level — creating cultural and emotional imagery (for instance, *tiramisù* evokes a sense of lightness, pleasure, and even flirtation).

A particularly significant phenomenon is metonymy, where the name of a cooking vessel (*lasanum*) or a social group (*carbonari*) becomes the name of a dish. This process demonstrates the organic connection between language, gastronomy, and the daily cultural practices of Italians.

Italian gastronomic vocabulary also plays a crucial identification function. The names of dishes mark regional identity, reinforce national values, and create symbolic images that communicate the Italian lifestyle beyond the country's borders. In this way, culinary terminology becomes part of the global “Made in Italy” cultural brand, where food serves as a symbol of quality, tradition, and a distinct way of life.

Modern research in gastronomic linguistics confirms that cuisine is not only a material phenomenon but also a symbolic system, in which every element—from ingredients to dish names—conveys cultural meaning. Italian cuisine is one of the brightest examples of this process, with each region, each historical period, and each social group contributing to the formation of a collective culinary heritage.

As Italian dishes spread across the globe, their names have acquired international status. Nevertheless, despite the effects of globalization, many of these names retain their historical and cultural depth, largely due to their strong etymological and cultural





associations embedded in the collective memory of Italians. This demonstrates how stable Italy's culinary lexicon remains despite global cultural exchange.

A significant role in preserving the authenticity of these names is played by gastronomic discourse. Cookbooks, travel guides, restaurant menus, and culinary television programs do not merely convey recipes — they actively create cultural narratives in which etymology and cultural connotations become essential parts of gastronomic storytelling.¹⁰

The findings of this research can contribute to several fields, including:

- Linguocultural studies, where they can serve as examples of how language and culture interact within the domain of gastronomy;
- Translation studies, particularly in the adaptation of culinary texts into other languages, where it is essential to preserve not only the denotative meaning but also the cultural significance;
- Cultural diplomacy, where they can be applied to the promotion of Italian culture through culinary branding and gastronomic tourism.

CONCLUSION

The study of gastronomic vocabulary is becoming increasingly relevant within the framework of linguocultural studies, where language is seen not only as a means of communication but also as a repository of cultural codes, traditions, and the historical memory of a nation. Italian cuisine, with its diversity and global popularity, serves as a vivid example of how national culture is reflected in language through the names of dishes. Many of these names, such as *pizza*, *pasta*, *lasagna*, and *tiramisù*, have firmly established themselves in the global lexicon and have become an integral part of culinary discourse in many countries. However, behind these well-known words lie not just labels for food products, but entire layers of cultural meaning that have been shaped over centuries.

The relevance of this study is due to the need to understand how historical events, cultural exchanges, and socio-economic processes influenced the formation and development of the names of Italian dishes. The study of the etymology and semantics

¹⁰ Gambero Rosso. (2023). *Tiramisù: storia, origine e curiosità sul dolce più amato al mondo*. Gambero Rosso.





of such names allows not only tracing their linguistic evolution, but also uncovering the cultural codes that reflect the Italian way of life, worldview, and national values.

Overall, the analysis shows that the names of Italian dishes perform several key functions. Firstly, they **mark regional identity** and shape perceptions of the geographic and cultural specifics of different regions of Italy. Secondly, they **transmit national values** — simplicity, respect for tradition, the importance of family meals, and respect for local products. Thirdly, they **create stable cultural images**, which contribute to the global perception of Italy.

Thus, Italian gastronomic vocabulary is not just a set of words, but a **powerful symbolic tool** that reflects historical memory, social relations, and aesthetic ideals. The preservation of original names when Italian dishes are introduced abroad confirms their **symbolic value** and **cultural significance**. In the context of globalization, it is precisely through authentic dish names that cultural codes are transmitted and a positive image of Italy is formed in the global cultural space.

The results of this study may be useful not only within the fields of linguocultural and semantic research but also in practical domains — including **gastronomic tourism, international marketing, and the promotion of national brands**.

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