



The Written and Oral Dimension of Culinary Recipes

Silvia-Anamaria Panoschi

Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacău, Romania

Science Faculty

157 Calea Mărășești, Bacău 600115

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-9130-0541>

Abstract: As a text type, the culinary recipe belongs to the category of procedural texts, and as a communicative activity, its purpose is to present the process of preparing a dish. This type of text exhibits different formal characteristics depending on whether it is in written or oral form. In this article, we conduct a comparative analysis of a corpus of written recipes by M. Kogălniceanu and Costache Negruzzi, Mihai Lupescu, and others, alongside a corpus of oral culinary recipes collected through field surveys as part of the eCULTFOOD project. By analyzing these texts, we aim to highlight defining features of the culinary recipe's profile.

Keywords: culinary recipe; oral; written; procedure; expressiveness.

How to cite: Panoschi, Silvia Anamaria. "The Written and Oral Dimension of Culinary Recipes." *LiBRI: Linguistic and Literary Broad Research and Innovation*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.70594/libri/10.1/4>



Introduction

Communication about human nutrition bears the imprint of a cultural code and various stylistic forms, whether literary, spoken, or written.¹ The discourse on food and eating habits contributes to defining the identity of both individuals and communities, as culinary imagination reflects not only the pre-industrial stage of rural society but also the phenomena of globalization and cultural mondialization.

It is often said that to truly understand and study the essence of a society, one must first learn its language and its cuisine.² Thus, the way people live is also reflected in how they nourish themselves, as gastronomy is an integral part of culture.³ We cannot overlook the mentalities that pass through the kitchen, since "cuisines travel with cultures, and cultures travel with people."⁴

Old European recipes reveal the intertwining of three culinary ideologies: one religious, one medical, and one courtly.⁵ In the Romanian cultural space, this fusion is reflected on multiple levels. From a historical perspective, the writings of foreign travellers who passed through Romanian lands between the 16th and 19th centuries serve as evidence. In their records, they mention the strictness with which Romanians observed the fasting periods of the Orthodox Christian calendar, while also describing the lavish feasts at princely courts.

Beyond such observations, numerous old cookbooks contain both fasting and non-fasting recipes, as well as descriptions of peasant meals. Among works of culinary ethnography, we highlight Mihai Lupescu's book *Din bucătăria țărânului român (From the Romanian Peasant's Kitchen)*, completed in 1916 but only published in 2000.⁶

We propose a brief exploration of the culinary recipe's specific features, focusing on the characteristics of both written and oral recipe discourse, particularly the language of this (meta)text, which is both utilitarian and informative. Culinary recipes are transmitted both orally and in writing. In oral transmission, the message is supported by linguistic elements (intonation, emphasis) and nonverbal cues (body language). However, writing offers advantages such as accuracy, stability, and long-term preservation of information.⁷

¹ Savin, Petronela. *Universul din lingură. Despre terminologia alimentară românească*. Institutul European, Iași, 2012, p. 240.

² Laplantine, François. *Descrierea etnografică*. Editura POLIROM, București, 2000, p. 46.

³ Simion, Eugen. *Cultură gastronomică și literatură de ceremonial I*. In *Caiete critice*, 12(302)/2012, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p.1.

⁵ Milică, Ion, Guia, Sorin. *Rețetele culinare: oralitate și scripturalitate*, I. In *Diacronia*, Facultatea de Litere „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, Iași, 2017, p. 3.

⁶ Lupescu, Mihai. *Din bucătăria țărânului român*. prefață de Radu Anton Roman, studiu introductiv și bibliografie de Maria Rafailă, postfață de Antoaneta Olteanu, Editura Paideia, București, 2000.

⁷ Milică, Ion, Guia, Sori ... *op. cit.*, p. 1.

The compositional pattern of written culinary recipes dates back to the mid-third millennium BCE and originally took the form of letters or teachings from father to son, marked by second-person address. These ancient texts included the technical name of the dish along with instructions regarding ingredients and preparation techniques.⁸ Over time, the prototype of the written recipe evolved. Until the mid-19th century, recipes typically had two sections: a title and a description. Starting in 1860, a third section was introduced, giving ingredients a distinct place. The modern structure, still in use today, includes the following elements:

- Title (dish name, cultural information)
- Ingredients (list of ingredients, specific quantities, preparation temperature, final yield)
- Instructions (step-by-step process, alternatives)

As informative texts, recipes fall under the category of non-artistic style, which is characterized by denotative language, a collective nature, and expressions marked by formulaic and repetitive structures within the speaker community. Words typically have unique, context-independent meanings.

In examining the written dimension of culinary recipes, we analyse texts from the following works:

- Mihai Lupescu, *Din bucătăria țăranului român*, Paidea Publishing, Bucharest, 2000
- M. Kogălniceanu & C. Negruzzi, *200 rețete cercate de bucate, prăjituri și alte trebi*
- Radu Anton Roman, *Bucate, vinuri și obiceiuri românești*
- Olivia Steer, *Dulciuri de poveste*

All four authors follow the structured and concise nature of recipes. However, across different authors and time periods, we can observe an evolution in these texts. In the work of M. Kogălniceanu and C. Negruzzi, we find an archaic, condensed recipe form in which ingredients and quantities are presented alongside the procedure. Mihai Lupescu compiles a collection of folk recipes, either personally recorded or collected from collaborators. He describes how *cozonac* (sweet bread) is prepared in different regions of Romania, detailing local customs and traditions, thus creating an inventory of preparation methods.

Radu Anton Roman adopts a recipe by Păstorel Teodoreanu and refines it, structuring it into sections: title, ingredients, specific quantities, instructions (under the heading *explanations*), observations, and preparation techniques. Olivia Steer, on the other hand, uses storytelling as a pretext to promote raw-vegan cuisine, focusing on dishes that require no baking and contain no fats.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

Despite their stylistic differences, these recipes all adhere to the established format and fulfill the instructional role characteristic of this type of discourse.

The oral recipe, unlike the written one, has specific features tied to its placement within a real communicative context—it is meant to be enacted. It can be a spoken explanation but is often accompanied by a demonstration. The speaker both tells and shows how the dish is prepared. In many cases, an oral recipe serves as a trigger for memories, leading the speaker to recall and share various contexts related to its preparation, creating a blend of past and present.

Unlike written recipes, oral recipes do not include a formal ingredient list. Ingredients are mentioned only when they are used, relying on instinct and habit. Cooking time and portion sizes are often omitted, as food is prepared "by eye," based on the number of people at the table. Thus, obtained through dialogue, oral recipes lack the fixed structure of written ones and instead take the form of a discursive sequence that presents the dish name, ingredients, and preparation techniques.

In her analysis of traditional recipe discourse recorded in various localities in Bacău County as part of a culinary heritage digitization project⁹, Petronela Savin classifies oral recipes into three categories:

1. Evoked Recipes
2. Performed Recipes
3. Condensed Procedural Recipes¹⁰

1. Evoked Recipes

This is the most common category collected during field research. These recipes are recalled from memory and generated in response to specific questions about a particular dish. Even though they take the form of a dialogue, they have the advantage of being concise. A key characteristic of evoked recipes is the lack of direct reference to the actual dish, meaning that the entire communicative intention is transformed into discourse.

⁹ Recipes recorded as part of the *PN-III-P2-2.1-BG-2016-0390 Digitalization of Culinary Cultural Heritage* project, *Bacău Region – eCULTFOOD*, were coordinated by Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacău, under the direction of Petronela Savin, and implemented in partnership with Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași and the *Art – Traditions – Heritage Without Borders* Cultural Association from Bacău. The project was conducted between October 1, 2016 – October 30, 2018, with funding from the Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education, Research, Development, and Innovation (UEFISCDI) through the *National Research, Development, and Innovation Plan for 2015–2020 (PNCDI III)*, under *P2 – Increasing the Competitiveness of the Romanian Economy through RDI, Line 1 – Knowledge Transfer to Economic Agents*. All research materials collected during fieldwork are integrated into the *eCultfood* platform (<http://ecultfood.ub.ro>).

¹⁰ Analyses of the three types of oral recipes can also be found in Petronela Savin's volume, *Bucate din bătrâni. Frazeeologie și cultură românească (Dishes from the Elders. Phraseology and Romanian Culture)*, Iași, Institutul European, 2018, pp. 116-132.

2. *Performed Recipes*

These are complex oral discourses captured while recording the actual preparation of a dish on camera. Because the act of cooking occurs simultaneously with speaking, the recipe discourse is often fragmented, marked by ellipses, repetitions, corrections, hesitations, and interruptions—especially when multiple people participate in the preparation. Unlike evoked recipes, performed recipes maintain a constant reference to the dish itself at various stages of preparation, which prevents the complete verbalization of the cooking process.

3. *Condensed Procedural Recipes*

This category combines elements from both evoked and performed recipes. It involves presenting the recipe for a fully prepared dish that is in front of the speaker. The dish may have been recorded in all its stages or prepared some time before the recording. While these recipes are concise, they are still influenced by the fact that the cooking process took place recently. Like performed recipes, the presence of the finished dish limits the need for a fully detailed verbal explanation.

Unlike cookbook readers, who are generic, undefined, and distanced from the author, the recipient of an oral recipe is physically present. The speaker directly transmits culinary knowledge and recommendations, turning the listener into an apprentice. The speaker, actively engaged in storytelling, both teaches and captivates through narration. Oral transmission also carries personal judgments, commentary, and accumulated wisdom, reflecting years of culinary experience.

It is well known that the written recipe serves as lasting proof on paper, enduring over time, while the oral recipe is fluid, contextualized, and spontaneous. The latter is the result of an informal, intentionally persuasive dialogue, and its proof lies in the final dish itself.

In the case of written recipes, the reader typically relies on an image of the final dish to understand how it should look. In contrast, when it comes to orally transmitted recipes, the only guide is the taste and aroma of the cooked food. Through the speaker's discourse, the listener gains access not only to the cooking process but also to culinary traditions as a whole, making the listener both a knowledgeable heir and transmitter of tradition.

Both written and oral texts analysed in this study adhere to the standards of textuality established by Beaugrande and Dressler (1981)¹¹:

- Cohesion: These texts include repetition¹², ensuring stability. In oral recipes, repetition is more pronounced, serving to reinforce the communicative bond¹³ or even appearing as a verbal tic.

¹¹ Milică, Ion, Guia, Sorin, *apud* Beaugrande & Dressler. *Rețetele culinare: oralitate și scripturalitate*, I. In *Diacronia*, Facultatea de Litere „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, Iași, 2017, p. 6.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 4.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

- Coherence: Culinary texts transmit structured information about cooking tools, ingredients, and techniques, highlighted through the use of gastronomic terminology. The coherence of these texts stems from meaningful units that contribute to understanding¹⁴.
- Intentionality & Acceptability: Both play a crucial role in the transmission and comprehension of culinary texts. Intentionality reflects the speaker's goal, while acceptability concerns the audience's engagement with the text. The information is clear, structured, and coherent due to the collaboration between speaker and listener, both of whom understand gastronomic terminology.
- Informativity: Culinary texts provide new information, making them valuable sources of knowledge.
- Situationality: These texts are contextually relevant, tailored to the intended audience. Since recipes are instructional texts, they blend narrative and procedural elements, showcasing the skills and passions of specific cultural groups, which means that recipes also serve an identity-building function¹⁵.

While both written and oral recipes share a didactic function and use gastronomic language, they differ in how they are transmitted and received, depending on the communicative context.

Conclusions

Culinary recipes reflect changes over time, across different societies, and in communication styles. At the same time, they highlight mentalities, tastes, and trends.

The structure of procedural texts is algorithmic, consisting of a sequence of ordered steps that transition from an initial stage (listing ingredients) to a final outcome (the completed dish). While procedure is the defining element, recipes take different forms in oral and written versions.

For research that aims to capture broader cultural contexts, culinary discourse provides valuable insights into the relationship between food and the material and spiritual realities of society.

References

- Choay, Françoise. *L'allégorie du patrimoine, chapitre I. Évolution de la notion du patrimoine et de la notion du tourisme*. éditeur DU SEUIL, 1999.
- Kogălniceanu, M., Negruzzi, C. *200 rețete cercate de bucate, prăjituri și alte trebi gospodărești*. Editura Dacia, Iași, 1842.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

- Laplantine, François. *Descrierea etnografică*. Editura POLIROM, București, 2000.
- Lupescu, Mihai. *Din bucătăria țaranului român*. Preface by Radu Anton Roman, studiu introductory study and bibliography by Maria Rafailă, post face by Antoaneta Olteanu, Editura Paideia, București, 2000.
- Milică, Ion, Guia, Sorin. *Rețetele culinare: oralitate și scripturalitate*, I. In *Diacronia*, Facultatea de Litere „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, Iași, 2017.
- Roman, R., A. *Bucate, vinuri și obiceiuri românești*. Editura PAIDEA, București, 1998.
- Savin, Petronela. *Universul din lingură Despre terminologia alimentară românească*. Institutul European, Iași, 2012.
- Savin, Petronela, Timocea-Mocanu, Cosmina (coord.), Jicu, Adrian, Cuceu, Maria. *Aceea era...puterea colacilor. Sărbători trăite, sărbători povestite în localitățile din județul Bacău*. Editura Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca, 2017.
- Savin, Petronela. *Corpus de discursuri culinare. Tipuri de texte. Faza II – Digitalizarea patrimoniului cultural alimentar al județului Bacău (PN-III-P2-2.1-BG-2016-0390)*. In Ofelia Ichim (coord.). *Clasic și modern în cercetarea filologică românească actuală*, Iași, Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, Iași, 2018, p. 229-224.
- Savin, Petronela. *Oral Practices for Sharing Recipes*. In “Transylvanian Review”, Vol. XXX, 2021, Supplement 2: MultiTrack Research on Food. Building the Romanian File (eds. Otilia Hedeșan, Cosmina Timocea-Mocanu), p. 151-162.
- Simion, Eugen. *Cultură gastronomică și literatură de ceremonial I*. In *Caiete critice* revistă editată de Fundația Națională de Știință și Artă, Grupul interdisciplinar de reflecție și Editura Expert, sub egida Academiei Române, 12(302)/2012.
- Steer, Olivia. *Dulciuri de poveste*. Editura Humanitas, București, 2013.

Internet resources

1. <http://www.ecultfood.ub.ro/> 06.01. 2020, 12.00.
2. http://www.proiectavdhela.ro/pdf/matilda_caragiu_marioteanu_varietatea_limbii_romane.pdf, 06.01. 2020, 12.30.