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More than just a taste: Exploring food metaphors in Jordanian Arabic

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Abstract

Language and metaphor are intertwined, with metaphor serving as a key tool for conceptualizing experience and expressing social meanings. This study investigates the sociolinguistic use of food-related metaphors in Jordanian Arabic, focusing on how they reflect and construct perceptions of physical appearance, personality, and social traits. It aims to fill a gap in previous research by exploring how such metaphors function as tools for expressing social meanings and identities. The study employs a mixed-methods design and uses Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Sociolinguistic Variation to analyze how age and gender affect the use and interpretation of food metaphors. Data were collected from 60 native speakers of Jordanian Arabic through a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to examine their use and interpretation of common food metaphors. The study found that food metaphors in Jordanian Arabic are grounded in embodied experience and shaped by sociolinguistic variables such as age, gender, and context. Quantitative analysis showed a significant difference in food metaphor usage across age groups, with older speakers using them more often than younger ones. Women used food metaphors to convey emotions and describe appearances, while men used them for humor and criticism, though these differences were not statistically significant. These findings highlight the role of metaphor as a linguistic resource for constructing social meaning and navigating interpersonal relationships in Jordanian society. The main meaning focus of these metaphors is not fixed but is interpreted based on the specific cultural context, reflecting and reinforcing cultural values.

Keywords: *conceptual metaphor, food metaphors, lingua-cultural identity, sociolinguistic variation, interpersonal relationships, cultural values, Jordanian Arabic*



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Больше, чем вкус: исследование пищевых метафор в иорданском диалекте арабского языка

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Аннотация

Язык и метафора тесно переплетены, метафора служит ключевым инструментом для осмысления опыта и выражения социальных смыслов. В данном исследовании изучается социолингвистическое использование метафор, связанных с едой, в иорданском диалекте арабского языка с акцентом на том, как они отражают и формируют представления о внешности, личности и социальных чертах. Цель исследования — восполнить пробел в предыдущих исследованиях, определив, как пищевые метафоры функционируют в качестве инструментов для выражения социальных смыслов и идентичности. В исследовании используется комплексный метод, включающий теорию концептуальной метафоры и социолингвистическую вариативность, для анализа того, как возраст и пол влияют на использование и интерпретацию метафор, связанных с едой. Данные были собраны у 60 носителей иорданского диалекта арабского языка с помощью структурированной анкеты и полуструктурированных интервью для изучения использования и интерпретации распространенных пищевых метафор. Исследование показало, что метафоры, связанные с едой, в иорданском арабском основаны на опыте и формируются такими социолингвистическими переменными, как возраст, пол и контекст. Количественный анализ показал значительную разницу в использовании пищевых метафор в разных возрастных группах: носители старшего поколения использовали их чаще, чем молодые. Женщины употребляли пищевые метафоры для передачи эмоций и описания внешнего вида, в то время как мужчины — для юмора и критики, хотя эти различия не были статистически значимыми. Полученные результаты подчеркивают роль метафоры как языкового ресурса для конструирования социального смысла и управления межличностными отношениями в иорданском обществе. Они свидетельствуют о том, что основной смысловой фокус этих метафор не является фиксированным, а интерпретируется в зависимости от конкретного культурного контекста, отражая и укрепляя культурные ценности.

Ключевые слова: концептуальная метафора, пищевые метафоры, лингвокультурная идентичность, культурные ценности, межличностные отношения, социолингвистическая вариативность, иорданский арабский

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1. Introduction

Language serves not only as a means for communication but also as a repository of cultural values, social norms, and collective identities (Joseph 2003, Ladilova 2015). Within this linguistic repertoire, metaphor emerges as a powerful cognitive and rhetorical device that allows speakers to conceptualize and communicate complex ideas by drawing connections between seemingly unrelated domains (Kövecses 2015). Rather than randomly mapping elements from a source to a target domain, metaphorical understanding relies on a principle of “main meaning focus”, as Kövecses (2010, 2011) argues. People map specific, salient knowledge and experiences from familiar source domains, such as the body (Zibin et al. 2024, Altakhaineh & Zibin 2024), animals (Almirabi 2022), feelings (Alazazmeh & Zibin 2023, Zibin et al. 2022), or food, onto abstract or unfamiliar target domains such as personality, behavior, or morality. The selection of these mappings is not arbitrary; it is guided by culturally shared and salient aspects of the source domain, creating a focal point of meaning that is then projected onto the target.

As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) famously illustrated, the conceptual metaphor IDEAS ARE FOOD exemplifies how abstract notions such as knowledge and understanding are often framed in terms of ingestion, digestion, and nourishment (e.g., “That’s a half-baked idea,” “I can’t swallow that claim”). This basic metaphor shows how food plays an important role in helping people understand and talk about mental and social ideas. It also provides a framework for studying culturally specific food metaphors, such as those found in Jordanian Arabic, in a more organized way. While such conventional metaphors are deeply entrenched in our conceptual system, novel metaphors represent a distinct subset of figurative expressions that require a deliberate cognitive and communicative effort from the speaker, along with a corresponding interpretive effort from the listener or reader (Musolff 2019).

In Arabic-speaking societies, and particularly in Jordanian Arabic, food metaphors are a salient and culturally rich aspect of everyday language. These expressions are not random; they are socially constructed and culturally transmitted, often carrying different meanings related to social characterizations, evaluations, and judgments. For example, the metaphor *fle:fleh* (‘bell pepper’) is commonly used to describe someone who appears attractive or put-together outwardly but lacks depth or substance internally. Other metaphors such as *zibdeh* (butter, meaning soft or easily influenced) or *ʕasal* (‘honey’, meaning sweet or pleasant) similarly illustrate how food-related language is mobilized to reflect people's physical traits, emotional states, or social behaviors.

This study aims to investigate the sociolinguistic use of food-related metaphors in Jordanian Arabic. That is, it seeks to understand how speakers use these metaphors to construct and communicate perceptions of physical appearance, personality traits, and social characteristics. Furthermore, it explores how factors such as age and gender shape both the usage and interpretation of these metaphors

within the Jordanian society. Given the stratified and dynamic nature of Jordanian society, where traditional norms coexist with modern influences, language serves as a sensitive barometer of social change and cultural continuity. In this context, food metaphors extend beyond mere stylistic elements; they function as instruments through which individuals navigate social identities and cultural belonging.

This study contributes to the growing body of work in sociolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, and cultural discourse analysis by focusing on the Jordanian Arabic context. While previous studies have examined metaphorical language in Arabic (Zibin et al. 2022, Altakhaineh & Zibin 2024), few have explored the specific domain of food metaphors or their sociolinguistic variation within Jordan. This research, therefore, fills a gap by combining theoretical insights from metaphor studies with empirical sociolinguistic analysis. It highlights how everyday linguistic practices reveal underlying ideologies about gender roles, emotional expression, and social hierarchy. In particular, the research is guided by the following questions:

- 1) How do Jordanian Arabic speakers use food-related metaphors to describe people's physical appearance, personality, and social traits?
- 2) To what extent do factors such as age and gender influence the usage and interpretation of food metaphors in Jordanian Arabic?

2. Literature review

2.1. Main meaning focus

Over the years, CMT has been refined and updated (Lakoff 1993, Kövecses 2010, 2011). This theory marked a significant shift from traditional views, arguing that metaphor is not just a feature of language but a fundamental way we understand and make sense of the world. According to CMT, we grasp abstract concepts through concrete experiences, and since food is a basic human experience, it provides a strong foundation for metaphorical thinking. The central idea that “metaphor is primarily a matter of thought and action” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 153) has influenced numerous studies in cognitive linguistics, discourse analysis, and sociolinguistics.

Kövecses (2010, 2011) has suggested a refinement to CMT, highlighting the importance of the “main meaning focus” in metaphorical mappings. He states (2010: 137), “Each source is associated with a particular meaning focus (or foci) that is (or are) mapped onto the target.” This meaning focus is typically fixed and understood within a speech community, characterizing the source and influencing how it relates to the target. For example, the common metaphor *TIME IS MONEY*—seen in phrases like “spending time,” “wasting time,” or “saving time”—illustrates a conceptual framework where time is viewed as a resource akin to money (Visola 2024). Here, the main meaning focus could be the ideas of *scarcity* and *measurability* linked to money, which are then applied to our understanding of time. Similarly, the metaphor *ARGUMENT IS WAR* appears in expressions like “defending

your position” or “attacking a weak point” (Ritchie 2003), focusing on *conflict*, *strategy*, and *the potential for victory or defeat*.

After CMT's introduction, a wealth of research emerged to investigate conceptual metaphors across various languages and cultures. Scholars like Kövecses (2005) expanded on the theory, exploring how metaphorical patterns vary across cultures while still reflecting universal cognitive tendencies. This has led to insights about the shared and culturally specific nature of metaphor. For instance, experiences related to bodily functions, like eating, walking, or seeing, often serve as universal sources, but their metaphorical extensions can differ based on local values and beliefs (see Yu 2008, Goschler 2005).

Food, in particular, stands out as a powerful experiential and cultural domain that lends itself well to metaphorical use. As a fundamental, everyday activity, eating is tied to a wide range of sensory, emotional, and social associations. It relates closely to survival, pleasure, family dynamics, gender roles, and social rituals. Because of this, food becomes a rich source for understanding more abstract human experiences. What aspects of food are emphasized often depends on the speaker's meaning focus. For example, when someone says, “He is a tough cookie,” the focus is on the cookie's resistance and toughness, which then transfers to the person being described. These expressions go beyond being only figures of speech; they reflect how we conceptualize reality through sensory and cultural experiences.

Moreover, the embodied nature of metaphor, as emphasized by CMT, helps explain why food metaphors are so common and enduring. Eating engages multiple senses (taste, smell, touch, sight), involves cultural norms and taboos, and serves as a medium for social bonding. These factors make food a very good candidate for metaphorical projection onto areas like personality, morality, emotional states, and interpersonal relationships. As Yu (2008) notes, since food is essential for survival and rich in bodily experience, it naturally becomes a key source for metaphorical thinking.

Beyond individual thought, metaphors play an important role in discourse and social interaction. As Cameron (2008) and Kövecses (2015) have noted, the use of metaphor is influenced not only by thought but also by context—including who is speaking, to whom, in what setting, and for what purpose. It is also important to consider the main meaning focus based on context. For instance, when describing a romantic partner as “honey”, the intended meaning focus may vary in a private conversation compared to a public one; in the former, it might convey affection and tenderness, while in the latter, it could serve to highlight a socially desirable trait. Thus, metaphors become tools that reflect and reinforce social norms, power dynamics, and cultural identities (Golden & Lanza 2013). Such a view aligns with sociolinguistic approaches, which explore metaphor as both a cognitive and communicative phenomenon. In this respect, Musolff's (2016) work has been particularly influential in illustrating how metaphors operate not only as cognitive mappings but also as pragmatic tools for negotiating meaning, stance, and ideology within discourse. Building on this perspective, everyday language use demonstrates

that speakers employ metaphors to position themselves socially, express emotions, create humor, and manage politeness (Burgos, Politico & Vergara 2025).

In Arabic-speaking contexts, metaphor theory has started to influence the study of both Classical and dialectal Arabic. However, much of the research has focused on religious, political, or literary texts (Al-Harrasi 2001, Shuqair 2021, Khalifah & Zibin 2022), with less emphasis on metaphor in everyday spoken varieties. Jordanian Arabic, like many dialects, is rich in metaphorical expressions—many of which are grounded in food and eating. These metaphors often reflect cultural values related to hospitality, honor, gender roles, and social hierarchy.

This study builds on the foundational insights of CMT, particularly Kövecses' refinement regarding the main meaning focus and the impact of context on metaphor use, to examine how food metaphors in Jordanian Arabic reflect not only conceptual structures but also cultural practices, social identities, and emotional expressions. In doing so, it links CMT with sociolinguistic inquiry, aiming to demonstrate how the metaphors we “live by” also help us define and navigate our social world.

2.2. Sociolinguistics and metaphor use

While metaphor is fundamentally a cognitive mechanism, as proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), it is also deeply embedded in social interaction and cultural context. From a sociolinguistic perspective, metaphor is not only a reflection of how people think but also a powerful tool for performing social roles, negotiating relationships, and expressing collective identities (Gibbs & Cameron 2008). One of the leading voices in sociolinguistic metaphor research, Lynne Cameron (2007), emphasizes that metaphor should be studied not merely as an abstract mapping between conceptual domains but also as discursive action—what she terms “metaphor in use.” According to Cameron (2007), metaphors are dynamically constructed in context, influenced by speakers' intentions, the social roles of participants, and the interactional setting.

Similarly, Musolff (2016) investigates the use of metaphor in political discourse, showing how entrenched metaphorical frames, e.g., “the nation as a ship” or “immigration as a flood,” are deployed to guide public opinion and sustain ideological positions. These metaphors do more than convey ideas—they create social realities and influence policy debates. This perspective aligns with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which often explores metaphor as a strategy for legitimizing social hierarchies or reinforcing cultural values (Fairclough 1995, Cornelissen, Holt & Zundel 2011).

In everyday communication, metaphor functions as a marker of social identity and group belonging. According to Deignan (2005), metaphor can signal shared cultural knowledge or insider status, especially when drawn from domains that are central to a community's life, such as food, religion, or family. In informal or intimate registers, metaphors, particularly those grounded in sensory experiences like taste or texture, can carry emotional weight and pragmatic subtlety. They may

soften criticism, intensify praise, or enhance humor, thus playing a role in face management and relational work (Holmes 2005).

Gendered metaphor use is another crucial area of sociolinguistic interest. Research has shown that metaphor choices are influenced by gender norms and are often used to construct gendered subjectivities. For instance, studies by Charteris-Black (2005) and Koller (2004) reveal that men and women tend to use different metaphorical schemas, particularly in professional or evaluative discourse.

Moreover, metaphor usage often correlates with social class and education. Kövecses (2005) notes that while conceptual metaphors may be universal, their linguistic realizations are deeply culture- and class-specific. For example, certain metaphorical expressions may circulate predominantly in rural dialects or urban youth slang, while others are more common in formal or elite discourse (Ndlovu 2018). This variation allows metaphor to function as a sociolinguistic variable in Labovian terms (Labov 1972), signaling both macro-social categories and more different social positions.

In multilingual and diglossic settings like the Arab world, metaphor usage also reflects language ideologies and code-switching practices. Bassiouney (2009) shows how Arabic speakers alternate between colloquial and standard varieties to index authority, solidarity, or irony. Metaphors embedded in these codes often carry layered meanings. In Jordan, where speakers navigate between Jordanian Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, and sometimes English, metaphor becomes a site of identity negotiation, especially among youth and in media discourse (Golden & Lanza 2013).

Recent studies have further highlighted how metaphor contributes to the development of multiple related meanings within and across languages. For example, Zibin, Khalifah, and Altakhaineh (2024) examined the word *bidzannin* ‘make mad’ in Jordanian Arabic and *mad* in American English, showing how similar metaphors can lead to polysemy complexes in two unrelated languages. Their findings reveal that certain cognitive processes behind metaphor use may be universal, yet the specific meanings that emerge are shaped by cultural and linguistic contexts. In a broader sense, Zibin and Solopova (2024) emphasize the need to explore metaphor across languages, cultures, and discourses to better understand how universal embodied experiences interact with cultural variation. This perspective supports the view that metaphor serves as a bridge between shared human cognition and culturally specific patterns of meaning.

In the specific context of food metaphors, sociolinguistic functions are particularly salient. These metaphors are often emotionally charged, context-sensitive, and socially performative. For example, calling someone *ʕasal* (honey) in Jordanian Arabic may signal affection, flirtation, or even sarcasm, depending on the tone, speaker, and relationship between interlocutors. Similarly, metaphors involving *ħa:rr* (spicy) or *mʕaffin* (rotten) may encode praise, critique, or humor, often with gendered or status-based implications. These expressions are not only metaphorical mappings but also interactional moves in socially situated discourse.

Finally, sociolinguistic studies of metaphor emphasize the importance of agency and variation. Speakers actively choose metaphorical expressions based on contextual appropriateness, stylistic preference, and communicative goals. This aligns with the view that metaphor is not static but emergent and negotiated, shaped by both cognitive structure and social interaction (Cameron & Maslen 2010).

Despite the rich theoretical grounding offered by CMT and the growing body of sociolinguistic research on metaphor use, relatively little attention has been given to how metaphor functions in everyday, informal discourse in Arabic dialects, particularly in relation to food. Most existing studies have focused on political, religious, or literary texts, leaving a significant gap in our understanding of how metaphor operates at the intersection of cognition, culture, and social interaction in colloquial Arabic. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the sociolinguistic use of food-related metaphors in Jordanian Arabic. Specifically, it seeks to understand how speakers use these metaphors to construct and communicate perceptions of physical appearance, personality traits, and social characteristics. Furthermore, it explores how variables such as age and gender influence both the production and interpretation of these metaphors. This study, focusing on everyday metaphorical expressions rooted in food, not only contributes to our understanding of metaphor in use but also offers insights into how language reflects and negotiates shifting cultural norms and social identities in contemporary Jordanian society.

3. Method

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate the sociolinguistic use of food metaphors in Jordanian Arabic. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, allowing for a richer and deeper analysis of participants' reported use and understanding of metaphorical expressions.

The study is grounded in CMT as based on Main Meaning Focus (Kövecses 2011), which demonstrates that metaphor is a cognitive tool for understanding abstract concepts through concrete experiences, such as food. In addition, the research draws on sociolinguistic theory, which emphasizes that linguistic variation is shaped by social identity and interactional context (Shodieva 2024). This helps explain why certain metaphors may be more common or differently interpreted across age groups or between genders.

3.2. Participants and sampling

We employed a stratified non-probability sampling method to ensure a diverse representation in our study. That is, we focused on two important demographic factors that can influence language use and metaphors: age and gender. Research indicates that different age groups may show variations in how they use language

due to generational changes and cultural shifts, while gender can shape communication styles and the types of metaphors people prefer (see Banikalef & Rababah 2018, Zibin, Daoud & Altakhaineh 2024). This is why we chose to stratify based on these factors.

Our sample included 60 native speakers of Jordanian Arabic, divided as follows:

- Age groups: 18–30 (20 participants), 31–50 (20 participants), 51+ (20 participants)
- Gender: Male (30 participants), Female (30 participants)

Specifically, we had 10 males and 10 females in each age group: 18–30, 31–50, and 51+. We recruited participants from both urban and rural areas of Jordan using convenience sampling. Our recruitment channels included local networks, community centers, and social media. For this study, we defined ‘urban’ areas as major cities with populations over 500,000, while ‘rural’ areas were smaller towns and villages with populations under 10,000, according to official Jordanian census data.

Stratified sampling aimed to ensure that people of different ages and genders were represented, but we need to recognize the limitations of the convenience sampling method used in each group. Participants recruited through the mentioned channels might not fully represent the larger community of Jordanian Arabic speakers in those age and gender categories. For instance, individuals who are active in community centers or on social media may have different traits or viewpoints compared to those who are not as involved. As a result, the findings need to be interpreted carefully, focusing on the patterns of metaphor use among these specific age and gender groups rather than making sweeping statements about all Jordanian Arabic speakers.

3.3. Data collection

3.3.1. Questionnaire

A semi-structured questionnaire was designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative insights into how participants understand and use food metaphors (see Appendix 1). The questionnaire consisted of four sections:

1. Informed consent to take part in the study.
2. Demographic Information: This section was used to collect information about participants’ age and gender.
3. Food Metaphor Recognition and Interpretation: Participants were shown a list of 9 common food-related metaphors (e.g., *ha:j lbinit Casal* ‘this girl is as sweet as honey). These metaphors were identified through various methods: (a) observing natural conversations in Jordanian Arabic, (b) reviewing linguistic literature on metaphor usage in Arabic dialects, and (c) consulting with three expert linguists specializing in Jordanian Arabic. For each metaphor, participants were asked to explain its meaning in their own words.

4. Contextual Usage: Participants were given three pre-defined scenarios that depicted different social situations (e.g., a business negotiation, a family gathering, a casual conversation with friends). These scenarios were based on initial ethnographic observations of common social interactions in Jordan. For each scenario, participants indicated whether they would typically use or hear the listed food metaphors and provided a brief explanation of their reasoning.

The questionnaire was pilot tested with 10 participants to evaluate clarity and comprehension, and adjustments were made based on their feedback.

3.3.2. Interviews

After conducting the quantitative analysis, we chose a smaller group of participants for semi-structured interviews to explore their attitudes and experiences. From our original sample of 60 participants (30 male and 30 female, with 20 individuals in each of the three age groups). Although the overall sample size (60 participants) may appear relatively modest, it was deemed sufficient for the purposes of this sociolinguistic study. The aim was not to produce statistically generalizable results, but rather to identify patterns and tendencies within a balanced group. The even distribution across gender and age ensured adequate representation of key social variables, allowing meaningful comparisons while maintaining manageability for in-depth qualitative follow-up. So, we carefully selected 15 participants for the interviews, making sure to include an equal number from each gender and age group (5 participants from each). During these semi-structured interviews, we focused on:

- How often participants use food metaphors in their everyday conversations.
- Their interpretations of various metaphors depending on the context.
- Any noticeable changes in metaphor usage across different generations.

The participants' answers were audio recorded to be analysed later. To analyze the interview data, we used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006), which involved several steps: (1) Transcription: We transcribed the interviews word for word to ensure accuracy; (2) Familiarization: We read and reread the transcripts to fully understand the data; (3) Initial Coding: We generated initial codes by identifying recurring ideas, patterns, and meanings related to food metaphor usage; (4) Theme Development: We grouped the codes into broader themes that captured the essence of the participants' experiences and views; (5) Theme Refinement: We reviewed and refined the themes to ensure they were coherent and accurately reflected the data; and (6) Reporting: Finally, we articulated the themes, supported by relevant quotes from the interviews. To ensure the reliability of our thematic analysis, we assessed inter-rater reliability using Cohen's Kappa, which resulted in a strong agreement score of 0.82, indicating a high level of consistency in our coding process.

3.4. Data analysis

We used both descriptive and inferential statistical methods to explore how different age and gender groups use food metaphors. Participants shared examples of food-related metaphors they often use, which allowed for both counting how frequently these metaphors were used and obtaining insights into their meanings.

Descriptive analysis, including calculating means and standard deviations, helped summarize food metaphor usage for each age group (18–30, 31–50, 51+) and gender (male, female). To find out if there were any significant differences, we conducted inferential statistical tests. Specifically, we ran an independent samples t-test to compare food metaphor usage between males and females. Additionally, we used a one-way ANOVA to look at differences in metaphor usage across the three age groups. When the ANOVA showed a significant difference, we followed up with a post-hoc Scheffé test to identify which specific age groups differed from each other. The qualitative data, which included metaphor examples and participants' explanations, were analyzed to uncover themes and cultural meanings related to the metaphors.

3.5. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Jordan (Decision No. 310/2024) on 12 December 2024. This study adhered to ethical guidelines to ensure participants' rights and confidentiality were protected. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences through a detailed informed consent form. All data collected was anonymized, with no personal identifiers recorded, and participants' responses were treated confidentially. Participation was voluntary, and participants had the freedom to skip questions or withdraw without penalty. The data were used solely for research purposes and securely stored, accessible only to the research team. Ethical approval was given before the study began.

4. Findings

4.1. Quantitative findings

There was some variation in the comprehension of food metaphors across both age and gender categories. However, the inferential analysis using an independent t-test shows that this difference was insufficient to be statistically significant as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Independent t-test results for the differences in comprehending food metaphors due to gender

Gender	N.	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Df	Sig.
Male	30	2.97	1.326	-1.322	58	0.191
Female	30	3.47	1.592			

Table 1 reveals that there are no statistically significant differences in the comprehension of food metaphor due to gender ($t = -1.322, p > 0.05$). That is, although females comprehended food metaphors more frequently than their male counterparts, the difference did not warrant statistical significance. To provide an answer to the question that is concerned with other food-related expressions known by both genders in addition to the ones provided in the questionnaire, Figure 1 reports the results (see Appendix).

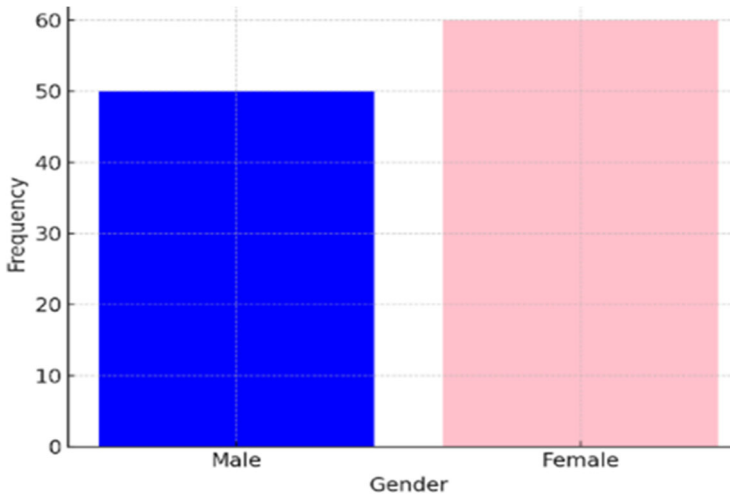


Figure 1. Frequency of Food Metaphor Use by Gender

Figure 1 shows that in the collected data, female participants reported a total of 60 instances of food-related metaphors, whereas male participants reported 50 instances.

Concerning age as a variable, to investigate the differences in the comprehension of food metaphor across age groups, means and standard deviations were calculated and reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations concerning the comprehension of food metaphor due to age

Age	N.	Mean	Std. Deviation
18–30	20	1.50	.607
31–50	20	3.50	.688
51+	20	4.65	.745
Total	60	3.22	1.474

An examination of Table 2 shows that there are differences in the comprehension of food metaphor due to age based on the difference in means. To determine if this difference is statistically significant, an ANOVA test was conducted, and the results are reported in Table 3.

Table 3 demonstrates that there are statistically significant differences in the comprehension food metaphor due to age ($f = 109.098, \alpha < 0.05$); the effect size was

79.3%. To identify which groups the differences favoured, a post-hoc Scheffé test was performed, and the results are shown in Table 4.

Table 3. ANOVA test results for difference in the comprehension of food metaphor due to age

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Between Groups	101.633	2	50.817	109.098	.000	0.793
Within Groups	26.550	57	.466			
Total	128.183	59				

Table 4. The post-hoc Scheffé test results for the difference in food metaphor due to age

(I) Age_Group	(J) Age_Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
18–30	31–50	-2.000*	.216	.000
	51+	-3.150*	.216	.000
31–50	51+	-1.150*	.216	.000

Table 4 illustrates that there are statistically significant differences in the comprehension of food metaphor due to age. Specifically, the group aged 51 years and older understood food metaphors significantly more than those aged 50 years and younger, and the group aged 31–50 years understood them significantly more than the group aged 18–30 years. Figure 2 displays the results of the frequency question where participants were asked to provide instances of food-related metaphors.

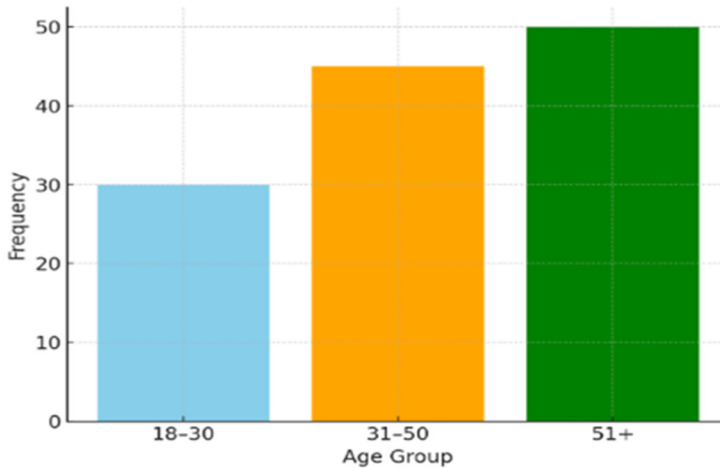


Figure 2. Frequency of Food Metaphor Use by Age

The figure reveals a noteworthy trend regarding age and the frequency of food-related metaphors in communication. It is the middle-aged (31–50) and older (51+) participants who reported the highest usage of these expressions. Specifically, individuals aged 51 and older noted 50 instances, while the 31–50 age group mentioned 45 instances. In contrast, the youngest group, aged 18–30, reported only 30 instances. This pattern shows that older generations tend to understand food

metaphors and use them more frequently in their speech. For these age groups, metaphors are not just embellishments; they are vital for describing social behaviors, expressing emotions, and reinforcing shared cultural values. In contrast, younger speakers, while still aware of these metaphors, seem to be more influenced by digital communication, global media, and multilingual environments. This has led to a broader but less metaphorically rich way of expressing themselves. As a result, the decrease in metaphor comprehension and use among younger people may reflect changing norms in casual conversation and evolving attitudes toward traditional language practices (see Zibin, Daoud & Altakhaineh 2024).

In the collected data, female participants comprehended food metaphors better than their male counterparts but with no statistical significance. Based on the interview data, gender differences in the use of food metaphors tend to serve expressive functions, such as conveying humor, articulating emotional stances, or evaluating others in socially attuned ways. In the context of Jordanian Arabic, this pattern suggests that women may use food metaphors not only as a linguistic resource but also as a way to navigate interpersonal relationships and expressing identity within everyday interactions.

4.2. Qualitative findings

Participants' interpretations of the metaphors suggest that the specific features mapped from the source domain (food) to the target domain (e.g., personality) are guided by the main meaning focus, as proposed by Kövecses (2010).

One of the most noticeable connections in the data is the link between sweet foods and positive personal traits, especially emotional warmth and physical attractiveness. It shows a cultural and cognitive tendency to associate sweetness with affection, desirability, and being likable in social situations. For instance, describing someone as *ʕasal* (عسل, *honey*) conveys that they are sweet-natured, kind, or physically appealing. Similarly, the term *qifṭāh* (قشطة, *clotted cream*) as in *jaxti ma: ʔazka:h qifṭāh* “Oh my, how sweet that boy is!” is used, especially for women or children, to denote beauty, softness, or delicacy. Describing a sweet little boy as cream illustrates how CMT especially the idea of main meaning focus, works within a cultural context. The main metaphor here is that GOOD QUALITIES ARE SWEETNESS/DELICIOUSNESS, using FOOD as the source domain—specifically *qifṭāh*, a rich cream—and the boy's character as the target domain. The main meaning focus connects the pleasant taste, delicacy, and purity of *qifṭāh* to the child, making him seem delightful, gentle, and innocent (see Kövecses 2011). The context of describing a child is important because it highlights specific qualities of *qifṭāh*—like innocence and gentleness—that might not stand out in other situations. This example has three main implications: (1) it shows the importance of identifying the specific main meaning focus in metaphors; (2) it emphasizes how context influences metaphor interpretation; and (3) it reinforces the idea that metaphor is a process grounded in context, where meaning is co-created.

Several participants reported other food-related expressions, e.g. *hala:wah* (حلاوة, *candy or sweet*), used to admire someone’s cuteness or charisma. A new playful expression is *كِيكة* (*ke:keh, cake*), often said about someone looking attractive or stylish, blending visual appeal with the indulgent connotation of dessert. These metaphors reflect the mapping below:

- **Source Domain:** Sweet food (e.g., honey, cream, cake, candy)
- **Target Domain:** Pleasant personality / physical attractiveness
- **Mapping:** BEING PLEASANT IS BEING SWEET/DELICIOUS

These expressions reveal how culturally shared experiences with food are metaphorically projected onto people, which reinforced positive evaluations through familiar sensory associations. During the semi-structured interviews, two older women (ages 51 and up) shared some insights into the cultural significance of using food metaphors to describe children. They indicated that “calling sweet little girls and boys *qif’ah* “cream” or *ʕasal* “honey” is a type of endearment in Jordanian Arabic”. They explained that simply saying “they are sweet” often feels inadequate to capture the child’s charm and beauty. The women indicated that the metaphors of cream and honey are chosen not just for their association with sweetness, but because they evoke richer sensory and cultural meanings. Cream suggests richness and delicacy, while honey conveys natural goodness and preciousness. Speakers use these endearments to express their love and admiration, moving beyond a simple description of ‘sweetness’ to convey an emotional connection.

Another frequently mentioned metaphor is *فليفة* (*fle:fleh, bell pepper*), used to refer to someone who acts self-important or dramatic, yet lacks real depth or value. The term draws on the physical property of the bell pepper, which is visually bold but hollow inside, making it a fitting metaphor for pretentious or superficial individuals. It is often used sarcastically to describe someone who thinks too highly of themselves without real justification. This expression reveals the following conceptual metaphor mapping:

- **Source Domain:** Hollow food (e.g., bell pepper)
- **Target Domain:** Superficial or self-important person
- **Mapping:** BEING PRETENTIOUS IS BEING AS HOLLOW AS A BELL PEPPER

Interestingly, younger participants (18–30), both male and female, were familiar with the “bell pepper” metaphor. One male participant explained its meaning by saying: “Yes, this vegetable [the bell pepper] really describes someone who is showy but empty on the inside”. This shows that the way the bell pepper is understood is rooted in Jordanian culture. The participant’s focus on the difference between the vegetable’s bright exterior and its lack of substance suggests a common cultural view of the bell pepper as a symbol of superficiality or pretentiousness. The example and insights provided by the participant possibly demonstrate how important it is to consider specific cultural meanings when thinking about

metaphors; the traits of being 'showy but empty' might not be the main associations with bell peppers in other cultures (see Kövecses 2011).

The metaphor كفتة (*kuftah*, meatball) was particularly popular among younger participants, especially in informal, humorous interactions. According to a young male participant “it is commonly used to describe someone who is unserious, goofy, or awkward—often someone who fails to take things seriously or behaves in a way that lacks control or structure”. The term draws on the physical qualities of a meatball: soft, loosely formed, and mushy, which metaphorically suggest a personality that lacks firmness and direction. This metaphor reflects the following conceptual mapping:

- **Source Domain:** Soft or mushy food (e.g., meatball)
- **Target Domain:** Unreliable, unserious, or clumsy behavior
- **Mapping:** HAVING A SOFT, LUMPY TEXTURE IS BEING UNSERIOUS OR GOOFY

This metaphor not only adds playful expressiveness to everyday Jordanian Arabic but also critiques behaviors seen as lacking maturity or strength.

A culturally rich metaphor is فقوس (*faqqu:s*, Armenian cucumber), which, in “خيار و فقوس”, is used to describe a person who is not given special treatment or is treated unequally in comparison to others.¹ The term often carries a slightly critical or lamenting tone, highlighting perceived favoritism within family, school, or workplace settings. In this proverb, unlike خيار (*xja:r*) regular cucumbers, *faqqu:s* is considered *less* desirable in the specific context of the saying, representing a situation where individuals are not valued or treated the same. Even though *faqqu:s* shares similarities with the *xja:r*, it is seen as less preferable in this comparison, and therefore metaphorically represents those who receive less attention, fewer privileges, or are otherwise disadvantaged. According to a female young participant “if someone describes me as *faqqu:s*, I will be sad”. This metaphor reflects the following conceptual mapping:

- **Source Domain:** Less desirable food (e.g., *faqqu:s* in “خيار و فقوس”)
- **Target Domain:** Unequal treatment, lack of privilege, being less favored
- **Mapping:** BEING DESCRIBED AS *faqqu:s* IS BEING LESS FAVORED OR LACKING

PRIVILEGE

This metaphor critiques social dynamics of inequality or spoiled behavior while playfully drawing on culturally familiar imagery.

Another metaphor that emerged in the data is شوربة (*fo:rabah*, soup), commonly used in Jordanian Arabic to describe someone that is messy, disorganized, or completely out of control. This expression draws on the source domain of soup as a liquid mixture of various ingredients, often lacking clear structure or boundaries, to describe situations that are confusing, unstable, or deteriorating.

¹ This word can either be pronounced as *faggu:s* or *faʔu:s* based on the JA subdialect used. The same applies to other words that contain the phoneme /q/ such as *qiftʰah* and *fustuq*.

The metaphor carries connotations of disorder and lack of coherence — just as soup blends everything together in an indistinct mass, a *fo:rabah* situation is one where elements, such as people, plans, or processes, are no longer functioning in a coordinated or predictable way. It is often used in social or workplace contexts to criticize poor management, conflict, or general dysfunction.

This metaphor illustrates the following conceptual mapping:

- **Source Domain:** Soup — a fluid, shapeless, mixed substance
- **Target Domain:** Social or organizational disorder
- **Mapping:** BEING FLUID AND MIXED [SOUP] IS BEING DISORDERED OR CONFUSED

This metaphor is commonly used in colloquial speech because it captures both the emotional tone of frustration and the culturally familiar experience of something that has lost its form or direction.

Another expression, *نعنة* (*naʕnaʕah*, minty), describes a person, most likely a lady, who is soft, fresh, and endearingly cute. The word *نعنع* (*naʕnaʕ*, “mint”) evokes qualities of freshness, coolness, and a gentle yet pleasant presence. In colloquial Arabic, describing a girl with mint suggests that she is sweet-tempered, tender, and charming in a subtle, refreshing way. A female young participant indicated: “it is a complement actually to be described as mint”. The metaphor captures both her delicate nature and her appealing aura.

- **Source Domain:** Fresh, fragrant herb (mint)
- **Target Domain:** Personality and physical charm
- **Mapping:** BEING FRESH AND AROMATIC (LIKE MINT) IS BEING ATTRACTIVE AND CHARMING

Besides, several food-based metaphors in Jordanian Arabic are used to describe facial features, especially in beauty-related discourse, illustrating how physical attractiveness is conceptualized through familiar, desirable foods. One prominent example is *خدود تفاح* (*xudu:d tuffaḥ*, “apple cheeks”), which refers to healthy, full, and rosy cheeks. The apple, as a symbol of freshness, ripeness, and natural beauty, maps onto youthful physical traits. This leads to the metaphorical mapping:

- **Source Domain:** Fresh, round fruit (apple)
- **Target Domain:** Youthful, attractive facial features
- **Mapping:** BEING FRESH AND ROUND (LIKE AN APPLE) IS BEING BEAUTIFUL AND HEALTHY

Another expression, *تم فستق* (*tim fustuq*, “pistachio mouth”), describes a small, delicate, and aesthetically pleasing mouth. The pistachio, a small but flavorful nut, is associated with daintiness and desirability, especially in romantic or poetic contexts. The metaphor suggests subtle charm and delicacy:

- **Source Domain:** Small, prized nut (pistachio)
- **Target Domain:** Mouth size and appeal
- **Mapping:** BEING SMALL AND PRECIOUS (LIKE PISTACHIO) IS BEING DELICATE AND ATTRACTIVE

Lastly, *عيون لوزية* (*ʕju:n lawzijeh*, “almond-shaped eyes”) is frequently used to describe elegant and aesthetically ideal eye shapes, particularly in female beauty standards. Almonds, with their elongated and smooth form, are metaphorically applied to describe graceful and exotic-looking eyes:

- **Source Domain:** Almond shape
- **Target Domain:** Eye form and aesthetic quality
- **Mapping:** HAVING AN ALMOND SHAPE (EYE) IS HAVING ELEGANCE AND BEAUTY

Together, these metaphors demonstrate how culturally resonant foods are used not just for humor or critique, but also to idealize and aestheticize the human body in ways deeply embedded in Jordanian evaluative language, in addition to highlighting idealized beauty standards.

5. Discussion

Departing from Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) initial emphasis on the structural role of metaphor in cognition, this analysis aligns more closely with Kövecses’s (2011) CMT as based on *mian* meaning focus. It acknowledges the embodied basis of metaphor, yet Kövecses argues that the *meaning focus* of a metaphor is paramount and can be identified through systematic analysis of linguistic data. Our data from Jordanian Arabic support this emphasis on meaning focus, revealing how specific food metaphors are deployed to conceptualize abstract domains such as personality traits, gender roles, emotional states, and social hierarchies.

This study critically *emphasizes the cultural contingency* of these metaphorical mappings. While embodied experiences undoubtedly contribute to the grounding of metaphors (Kövecses 2005, 2022, Yu 2008), the precise meaning focus can vary significantly across cultures based on our analysis. For example, the connotations associated with calling someone *ʕasal* ‘honey’ or *naʕnaʕah* ‘minty’ to describe tenderness and warmth are embedded in Jordanian cultural values and culinary traditions. These metaphors might not evoke the same associations or emotional resonance in other cultural contexts, which highlights the role of cultural knowledge in interpreting metaphorical meaning. This finding contributes to CMT by showing that while underlying embodied experiences may be universal, the specific *cultural salience* of particular sensory experiences shapes the meaning focus of food metaphors in unique and culturally specific ways. Thus, the Jordanian case provides insights into universalist assumptions within CMT. It shows how culture mediates the relationship between embodied experience and metaphorical meaning.

This study goes beyond individual cognition by showing how these metaphors are embedded in specific sociolinguistic contexts. Following Cameron's (2008) notion of "metaphor in use", the findings reveal that food metaphors in Jordanian Arabic are discursively and socially motivated. They are especially prevalent in informal settings, where speakers deploy metaphor not only to describe but also to perform social roles and manage interpersonal relationships. This echoes the arguments of Deignan (2005) and Holmes (2005), who emphasize the role of metaphor in relational work and face management.

The quantitative findings of this study highlight the sociolinguistic variability of food metaphor usage in Jordanian Arabic, particularly across age groups. The data reveal that middle-aged and older speakers (ages 31–50 and 51+) use food metaphors more frequently than younger individuals. These older groups reported 45 and 50 instances respectively, compared to only 30 by the 18–30 age group. This generational pattern suggests that older speakers are more anchored in culturally entrenched metaphorical practices, where food metaphors serve as pragmatic tools for expressing social norms, emotional subtleties, and communal values. In contrast, the relatively lower usage among younger speakers may reflect their greater exposure to digital and globalized forms of communication, which promote alternative discursive styles and may marginalize traditional metaphorical expressions. Thus, metaphor use among Jordanian youth appears to be evolving, shaped by changing linguistic ideologies and communicative preferences.

Although statistical analysis did not reveal significant gender differences in overall metaphor usage, qualitative trends suggest potential variations in the types of metaphors favored by men and women, warranting further exploration. These observations resonate with findings from Charteris-Black (2005), Koller (2004), and Golden and Lanza (2013) regarding gendered metaphor use. In our Jordanian Arabic data, metaphors used by women appeared to more frequently highlight physical appearance and emotional resonance (e.g., *tim*, *fustuq*, *ʕasal*), potentially reflecting sociocultural expectations around femininity, beauty, and nurturance. Conversely, metaphors used by men seemed to lean more often towards humor, sarcasm, and critique (e.g., *kuftah*, *filfil*), possibly reinforcing masculine ideals of strength, assertiveness, and emotional restraint. These patterns were not statistically significant in this study, but they align with the broader idea that metaphors function not only as conceptual tools but also as potential social scripts that reinforce or resist dominant ideologies. Future research with larger sample sizes and more focused methodologies is needed to determine the extent to which these observed trends represent significant gendered patterns in Jordanian Arabic metaphor use.

The cultural salience of food in Jordanian society further enhances the metaphorical potential of the domain. As discussed by Yu (2008) and Goschler (2005), food metaphors are not arbitrary; they are culturally embedded and emotionally potent. In Jordanian Arabic, the metaphorical association between food and human character traits taps into broader cultural themes of familial intimacy and social cohesion. For instance, calling someone *ʕasal* 'honey' invokes not just

sweetness, but also warmth and a communal ethic that is central to Jordanian identity. These metaphors thus serve as cognitive shorthand for culturally valued traits.

Moreover, the metaphorical mapping of food items onto social status and moral judgment—such as *faqqu:s* to denote superficiality or favoritism—illustrates how metaphor becomes a vehicle for social commentary. In this way, metaphor intersects with the critical discourse perspective advanced by Musolff (2016) and Fairclough (1995), who emphasize how entrenched metaphorical frames shape ideological stances and social critique. Jordanian speakers use food metaphors not only to describe people but also to subtly critique power dynamics, expose favoritism, and navigate social inequalities.

In synthesizing insights from CMT as based on main meaning focus and sociolinguistics, this study affirms that metaphor is simultaneously a cognitive structure and a discursive resource. The metaphors examined here are grounded in embodied experience but activated within culturally meaningful contexts. They are shaped by and reflective of broader social variables—age, setting—and are employed to construct, negotiate, and contest identities. As Cameron and Maslen (2010) argue, metaphor is not static but emergent, shaped by the interaction between speaker agency and cultural convention.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This study has demonstrated that food metaphors in Jordanian Arabic are far more than stylistic embellishments; they are integral cognitive and social resources that reflect, negotiate, and reproduce cultural values and social identities. Shifting from a purely structural view of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this research highlights the importance of meaning focus in metaphorical understanding, aligning with Kövecses's (2011) emphasis on identifying the core meaning of a metaphor as it is used in context. Sociolinguistic analysis reveals how this meaning focus is embedded in embodied experience and culturally salient domains, but also shaped by the specific context of use.

The findings reveal sociolinguistic variation in the meaning focus of food metaphors across age and gender in Jordanian Arabic. Older generations tend to employ traditional, culturally rooted metaphors, using them to reinforce social norms and shared values, with the meaning focus readily understood within established cultural contexts. Younger speakers—shaped by digital media, globalization, and multilingual exposure—favor more creative yet less frequent metaphor use, signaling changing linguistic practices and potentially shifting the meaning focus in novel ways. Statistical analysis did not reveal significant gender differences, but qualitative trends suggest that women may emphasize appearance and emotional expression, aligning with feminine social roles, whereas men may more commonly use metaphors for teasing and humor, potentially reflecting masculine communicative styles; again, the meaning focus is contingent on these social roles and communicative intentions.

Contextually, the meaning focus of food metaphors is actively negotiated in informal and intimate settings—such as homes, cafes, and online interactions—where relational and affective language is prominent. These metaphors serve as part of a shared cultural repertoire that facilitates social bonding, identity performance, and interpersonal negotiation. As such, food metaphors in Jordanian Arabic operate on multiple interconnected levels: as cognitively resonant tools grounded in embodied experience, as social instruments for managing relationships, and as cultural symbols whose meaning focus both reinforces and challenges societal norms depending on the specific context and the actors involved. This interaction of age, gender, and context highlights the dynamic nature of metaphorical language as both a mirror and a force within Jordan’s evolving sociocultural context. Viewing the meaning focus of these metaphors through the dual lenses of CMT as based on main meaning focus and sociolinguistic variation illustrates how language encodes the intersection of thought, culture, tradition, innovation, and social identity in colloquial Arabic, highlighting the importance of considering context when interpreting metaphorical meaning.

Future studies could expand the scope of food metaphor research in Jordanian Arabic by exploring regional and socioeconomic variations to capture a broader range of linguistic diversity and to examine how these factors influence the meaning focus of food metaphors. Additionally, comparative studies with other Arabic dialects or culturally related languages could enhance understanding of how the context-dependent nature of food metaphors intersects with cultural identity across contexts. Finally, investigating the role of metaphor in formal versus informal registers, as well as its use in media and political discourse, could reveal further dimensions of metaphorical language as a tool for social influence and cultural expression, particularly in how context is used to shape the intended meaning of metaphors.

Appendix

Food Metaphors in Everyday Language (translated)

You are invited to participate in a questionnaire about food-related metaphors. Before you proceed, please review the following information:

This study aims to analyse food-related metaphors and how they are used in context. Your participation is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time without consequence.

We have taken the following steps to protect your privacy and ensure ethical conduct:

- **Anonymity:** All data collected will be anonymized. No personal identifiers will be recorded.
- **Confidentiality:** Your responses will be treated with strict confidentiality.
- **Data Security:** The data will be used solely for research purposes and securely stored, accessible only to the research team.
- **Ethical Approval:** This study has received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Jordan (Decision No. 310/2024, dated 12 December 2024).

By proceeding with the questionnaire, you indicate your agreement to participate, having read and understood the information provided in this form.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Demographic information

Age:

- Under 18
- 18–24
- 25–34
- 35–44
- 45–54
- 55+

Gender:

- Male
- Female

Food metaphor recognition and usage

Which of the following food-related metaphors are you familiar with?

1. مبيّن الموضوع هاد في ناس خيار وناس ففوس “It's clear in this situation that some people are cucumbers and some people are gourds”
2. شفّتي شو سوت؟ كفتة على الآخر “Did you see what she did; Kofta to the max”
3. يعني إذا حكينا إنه بطاطا قليل عليه “I mean, if we said that he's a potato, it's not enough for him.”
4. عن جد خالد شوربة “Seriously, Khaled is soup”
5. هالبنت عن جد غسل “This girl is seriously honey”
6. يخني ما أركاه قشطة Oh my, how cream that boy is!
7. والله هالبنت خدودها تفاح “I swear, this girl's cheeks are apples”
8. عيونها لوزية وتمها فستقة “Her eyes are almond and her mouth is a pistachio”
9. أنا بقدر أحكيك وطفه لأنه فلفل “I can tell you, hire him because he is pepper.”

- For each metaphor, please briefly explain what it means?
- Do you know any other food metaphors used to describe people, other than the ones used above? If yes, please write them down.

Contextual usage

In what contexts do you most frequently encounter food-related metaphors? (Select all that apply)

- Everyday conversation (e.g., with friends, family, colleagues)
- Digital communication (texts, social media)
- TV shows or movies
- News or media articles
- Academic or professional settings
- Other (Please Specify): _____

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