

The words to (not) say it

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The European Parliament has proposed banning the use of names that could recall meat-based preparations by companies marketing plant-based or laboratory-produced raw materials. This, they say, is to avoid confusing the consumer and to protect the work of farmers. However, the operation is neither simple nor immediate. Nor, perhaps, sensible.

Marx and Alice had warned us

Do you remember Humpty Dumpty? He was an egg, and in a famous English nursery rhyme, he falls off a wall and there's no way to put him back together. However, somehow, he must have recovered, because we find him again in Lewis Carroll's second novel (the author of *Alice in Wonderland*), titled *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*. In this book, Humpty Dumpty, having fully recovered his form (both literally and figuratively),

discusses words with Alice:

“When I use a word,” said Humpty Dumpty in a rather contemptuous tone, “it means exactly what I choose it to mean... neither more nor less.”

“That’s a bit much,” Alice replied, “you must be able to give different meanings to words.”

“Well, I can see that,” said Humpty Dumpty, “but only depending on who’s in charge.”

Indeed, it’s all about control. I like to think that Carroll had read *The German Ideology* by Karl Marx, published a few decades earlier, and that he wonderfully popularized the assertion that:

“Individuals who make up the ruling class possess, among other things, the consciousness, and therefore think. As they dominate as a class and define the whole scope of a historical era, it is clear that they do so in all its extension, and thus, among other things, they also dominate as thinkers, as producers of ideas that regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their time. It is therefore clear that their ideas are the dominant ideas of the era.”

However, I’m not sure if French MEP Céline Imart, from the center-right, had these authors in mind when she saw her amendment proposal for the Common Market Organization (CMO) approved by a large majority on October 7. Imart pointed out that “it’s a question of transparency and clarity for consumers, as well as recognizing the work of farmers,” and added that she doesn’t want to ban plant-based alternatives (as if she’s so good...), but only “to ensure that terms have their real meaning.”

Nothing has happened

In fact, at the moment, nothing has happened beyond what was mentioned above. Even though many headlines have claimed that “Europe has banned” calling soy-based burgers or chickpea-based meatballs as such, the truth is that the EU hasn’t actually banned anything yet. The European Parliament does not legislate, but only proposes. The proposed amendment will now be considered by the Commission, which will initiate a discussion with Parliament and the Council, resulting in what, in a term Carroll would have loved, is called a *Trilog*.



The European Parliament during a plenary voting session ©PE2023

Quindi calma e gesso, ma intanto cerchiamo di capire, dato che tutta quest'ansia di chiarezza verso il consumatore è quanto meno intermittente da parte delle istituzioni. Prova ne sia la riluttanza a usare in etichetta parole come “artificiali” o “sintetici” per indicare, ad esempio, gli aromi di sintesi, ovvero molecole “identiche” a quelle naturali ma ottenute in laboratorio spesso a partire da materie prime non commestibili. Sarebbe un bel modo, quello, di evitare confusione. Invece no, gli aromi sintetici si chiamano “aromi naturali identici”, ma in etichetta possono essere indicati, per brevità (non sia mai mai che disturbiamo il consumatore a leggere una o due parole in più) sia come “aromi naturali” sia direttamente come “aromi”. Ma torniamo alle nostre faccende.

Vecchie parole per nuovi prodotti

So, let's take it easy, but in the meantime, let's try to understand, given that this anxiety for clarity toward the consumer is at least intermittent on the part of the institutions. Evidence of this is the reluctance to use terms like “artificial” or “synthetic” on labels to indicate, for example, synthetic flavors, i.e., molecules

“identical” to those found in nature but obtained in a laboratory, often from non-edible raw materials. That would be a good way to avoid confusion. Instead, no, synthetic flavors are called “identical natural flavors,” but on labels, they can be listed, for brevity (heaven forbid we disturb the consumer by adding an extra word or two), as “natural flavors” or simply “flavors.” But let’s return to our own affairs.

Old Words for New Products

There are several reasons why the “meat-sounding” issue is not an immediate solution.

One reason raised by Stefano Bartezzaghi, a semiotician (he teaches at IULM in Milan) and journalist, who agreed to discuss these topics with us, is quite striking:

“It’s a clever idea, this ‘meat sounding,’ but technically it means nothing. You can’t give a name to something new without referring to something known. The word ‘meatball’ comes from ‘meat.’ If the argument were that meatballs are only those made from meat, then butchers should sue paper mills that use wood pulp! When they invented the mast for sailing ships, they didn’t ask permission from the lumberjacks (much less from the forests) to name it; when they gave a name to bunk beds, they didn’t consult the aristocrats who lived in castles. Joking aside, language doesn’t work that way, there are common words that serve to name innovations, and no one gets confused. We constantly talk about the web (spiderweb), mouse (the animal), platforms, and networks: they are not new words, but the objects that fall under their meaning are new. Why should those who produce plant-based food be deprived of part of their linguistic heritage?”



Stefano Bartezzaghi

The most important reason, in legal terms, however, is another: there is no primary European law – such as a directive or regulation – that prohibits the use of butchery terms for other sectors. For milk, for example, there was a primary regulation, and that made it relatively easier, in 2017, to reach the European Court of Justice ruling that prohibits calling anything “milk” that does not come from the milking of a mammal, and prohibiting the use of dairy-related terms for products derived from plant-based raw materials.

So, goodbye to tofu butter, veggie cheese, etc. Italy saved almond milk, due to deep-rooted traditions, and other countries received the same exemption for established products, but the “new” soy or oat milks were not saved, and from that point on, they have been referred to as beverages or similar expressions on their packaging and labels.

Was Gaber Right?

The ideology, the ideology

*Despite everything, I still believe it exists,
it's about continuing to assert a thought and its why,
under the pretext of a contrast that isn't there,
if it is, who knows where it is, who knows where it is.*

Let's start from there, from the legal contrast that could exist.

The issue is the Common Market Organizations (CMOs), which for each category of agricultural products (wine, cereals, milk...) define a set of European rules, starting with the definition of the products themselves. We have already seen that for some categories, the rules are clearer, while for meat, the situation is still evolving.

This is a problem for the market, explains Stefano Masini, professor of Food Law at the University of Tor Vergata in Rome:

“Any element of confusion or ambiguity in the information provided to the consumer translates, from a market perspective, into an obstacle to trade. The need for harmonization, aimed at standardizing linguistic rules in the circulation of food products, regardless of their qualitative characteristics, has already penalized our country due to the assortment of traditional products and consumption habits. I think of the term ‘vinegar,’ which traditionally in Italy is the result of wine fermentation and has been involved in a process of devaluation of differential qualities with a linguistic homogenization choice that has also included products derived from the fermentation of apples or pears, with penalizing effects for our producers, but in respect of other European traditions. From a legal perspective, the ruling on dairy products is a landmark, but for meat, a more complex definition must be pursued due to the lack of a precise definition.”



Stefano Masini

What makes things even more complex is the fact that technology allows the production of foods that didn't exist until recently, and thus they can only be given a comprehensible name, as Bartezzaghi said, by referring to terms that the consumer can understand.

“On this, I completely disagree,” Masini clarifies, “because using terms known in the collective imagination and culture to classify products of different compositions influences consumer behavior and translates into a misleading operation, leading to an evident loss of value for traditional productions:”

The market doesn't want thoughts

So, we've reached the painful point: the reasons of the market, the concerns for exchanges between countries, at least within the European Union. For this reason, when it comes to food definitions, individual member states cannot legislate; only the European Union can. This is also why Italy's Law 172/2023, “Provisions on the prohibition of the production and marketing of foods and feeds made, isolated, or produced from cellular cultures or tissues derived from vertebrate animals, as well as the prohibition of using the term ‘meat’ for processed products containing plant proteins,” is, shall we say, not very consequential.

However, the amendment proposed by Imart relies on other elements; the market seems to be the last of the problems. The issue would be the protection of farmers' know-how and clarity in communication to consumers. What does Bartezzaghi think about it?

“It's clear that all this anxiety about regulating words has to do with the market and not with common use. You can't regulate common use. We continue to order a cappuccino with soy milk, with all due respect to packaging and labels. Just as we continue to call jam ‘jam’ even when it's made from peaches or apricots and not just citrus fruits. Regulation distances spoken language from written language in an attempt to stem the flow of changes. Labeling should aim at correctness toward the consumer, and you can set rules that all producers must follow, but you can't regulate how people speak. It might change over time, but it takes generations. It's like when street or square names change: for decades, both versions survive, and if you want to be sure to be understood using the new name, you'd better mention the old one too, perhaps with an ‘ex’ in front.”

If we don't use the words we have, how will we understand each other?

As Heraclitus already said: “To speak with understanding, you must rely on what is common,” and this is reminded to us in Umberto Galimberti's latest book, *Le disavventure*

della verità (Feltrinelli 2025). However, the fact remains that, in this specific case, the proposed ban doesn't seem to go in the direction of helping consumers choose, and it's unclear how an eggplant cutlet could harm the know-how of cattle farmers.

"If each of us became a purist, we'd be ruined," continues Bartezzaghi. "I'm Milanese, for me, there is no other cutlet than veal. I'm horrified by the idea of a chicken cutlet, let alone one made from eggplant. But as an observer of linguistic practices, I say the opposite: there are languages, and then there are sublanguages, variants of common language: they differ by region, ethnicity, or even social groups. When these groups meet, they'll need to find a way to understand each other, right? And how can they do that if not by starting with shared concepts and words that make sense to everyone? Here, there is no legality, and regulating by exclusion, rather than opening up to new meanings of already known words, creates friction between the decision of those who have the authority to regulate and those who hold the use of words. In informal speech or writing, the common usage will continue to prevail."

From word to brand is just a step

This is certain, but the rules that would be imposed on producers of vegetarian alternatives will create problems for those producers, and the EU, as pointed out by Michele Fino, a professor of European Law at the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Pollenzo (Cn) in a social media post, cannot harm one category of economic operators while favoring another.

Bartezzaghi, does preventing a group of producers from using words that belong to common usage harm them?

"Well, I'd say definitely yes, because it's as if the market were turning common words into brands. Sometimes, in everyday use, the opposite happens, meaning that words originally used as brands become common names for objects belonging to the same category. Think of calling any adhesive tape 'scotch,' or the English term for vacuum cleaner, 'hoover,' or even the slightly vulgar way we refer to condoms as 'goldoni,' using it in the singular too, which comes from the perfectly ordinary surname of the person who put the first brand of this product on the market, his own invention. However, the market, or at least the institutions that regulate it, does exactly the opposite by referring to common words as if they were brands, and as such, "property" of someone or a category of producers: sausage, meatball, steak, cutlet. How should they be replaced with equally clear and effective words? If taboos

are imposed by law, then you literally won't have the words to say it anymore."

So, If this ban proposal goes through, what alternative definitions would be possible?

"Language has its limits, we see that all the time. At some point, you have to stop and accept the rules of linguistic communication. If you decide instead to overturn the rules, sooner or later, you'll step out of language. It happened with the LGBTQ+ issue: the concern to include as many shades and categories as possible, without leaving anyone out, has exceeded the possibilities of language, and they had to resort to that sign '+,' which is a non-linguistic sign."

Here, the concern seems exactly the opposite, i.e., the desire to exclude, but the theme is the same. So, should we abandon the idea that language makes the world? It's an intriguing idea, but judging by this small European incident, it seems that things come first, and only later do the words follow.

"Yes, I believe that's a principle often taken for granted, but I would correct it precisely based on Humpty Dumpty's position: the meaning of words is determined by those in power."

However, in a democratic system, institutions should be there to protect the common good; they should be a bit less arrogant than Humpty Dumpty.

"Certainly, and in fact, there is an additional risk in modifying the use of language through regulation: namely, that citizens might feel that institutions are not only uninterested in the common use of language but also in the common life of people connected to it; that institutions are not there to facilitate their daily lives, but rather to protect the particular interests of a certain economic category, raising linguistic smokescreens, knowing full well that we will all continue to call cutlets 'cutlets' even if they're made from tofu, but making sure that those who produce meat cutlets have more tools—more words—and facilitation in market exchanges, so that it's clear to everyone who's in charge."

Fonte: <https://www.ruralhack.org/en/meat-sounding-ban-plant-based-products/>