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a cura di

Tina Maraucci

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“Ognuno porta  
dentro di sé  
un mondo intero”

Saggi in  
onore  
di Aysel  
Saraçgil

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“Ognuno porta dentro di sé  
un mondo intero”

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Tina Maraucci, Ilaria Natali, Letizia Vezzosi

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# Food Culture and Translation: A Proposal for an Applied Methodological Framework

Isabella Martini

## 1. Introduction

Food culture is possibly among the very first signs of cultural identity that travellers acknowledge when abroad, responding to one crucial human need: feeding. Food practices and traditional food items are considered intangible heritage, which, according to the definition available on the UNESCO website:

[...] includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts. (UNESCO, n.d.)

Food is a living expression of cultural identities; traditional food processing goes back to the ancestors and reaches out to our times – both in traditional households and as flagship of the tourism industry in restaurants and in eating places worldwide. This study aims at discussing a methodology to translate culture-specific terms to make cultural identities expressed through food items on menus accessible, by trying to answer three research questions:

– Which preliminary analytical steps are needed before the actual translation of restaurant menus?

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- What textual, co-textual, and contextual elements influence translation strategies when translating a restaurant menu?
- What intercultural and transactional functions should translated menus address to educate/inform customers about the identity of their culture?

Drawing from the seminal distinction between foreignizing and domesticating strategies (Venuti 1995) to deal with culture-gap terms, and from Nida's (1964) functional equivalence, to mention only a couple of referential studies, this paper discusses a methodological approach to deal with cultural "untranslatable" terms, with examples taken from the menu of a traditional Florentine restaurant.

## 2. Overview of the Theoretical Framework of the Study

Since Translation Studies were officially "born" in 1976 (Bertazzoli 2015 [2006]), multiple approaches on how to process texts to be translated and on how to reflect on texts in translation have been devised. Some of the foundational theoretical and methodological sources for this study are Venuti (1995) for the fundamental distinction between foreignizing and domesticating approaches; Cavagnoli (2012) for the discussion of deforming tendencies, taken from Berman (1999); Binelli (2007 [2006]), in particular the approach of textual levels following Marcello Pagnini (1988); Nord (2005 [1991]) for the reflection on language functions applicable to translation; Baker (2018 [1992]), for the debated translation strategies that opened up multiple perspectives on cultural difference in translation; and Hatim (2009) for discussing the macrostructures operating at textual and contextual level in the translation process.

Other seminal contributions for the development of this research are Osimo (2011 [1998]), for providing the foundations for translation analysis to be applied to texts in translation, and Diadori (2012), a referential text offering a comprehensive collection of translation theories and practical examples on the most varied text types – poetry, songs, comics, theatre, etc. More texts that contributed to shape this reflection on translation are Eco (2003) and Faini (2004).

Despite their everyday usage worldwide, limited academic research has been conducted on the translation of restaurant menus so far. Some relevant contributions are Grammenidis (2008) on a corpus of Greek menus translated into foreign languages; Desjardins (2011) on the corpus of the menus of the Hotel du Chateau du Frontenac in English and French or bilingual; Ghafarian, Kafipour, Soori (2016) on a corpus of 40 Persian restaurant menus translated into English; Graziano (2017) on marketing local Italian food in 100 menus from Lazio; Chłopicki (2018) on Polish restaurant menus translated into English; and some other studies on Arabic, Chinese, and Thai menus, all translated into English.

Restaurant menus are considered pragmatic texts (Grammenidis 2008). They are informative and operative texts explicitly designed to attract customers and to make customers want to buy food items, in particular traditional local specialities. They present nominal phrases which are monoreferential, cultur-

ally loaded, and present no determiners. As far as translation is concerned, the target text should achieve the full referential or operational function, as well as elicit the same effect of the source text, following the concept of functional or dynamic equivalence expressed by Nida (1964).

Food items in restaurant menus qualify as *realia*. *Realia*, or culture-gap or culture-bound terms (Binelli 2007 [2006]), are all those objects of the material culture pertaining to a certain culture (Osimo 2011 [1998]; Kwiecinski 2001). *Realia* comprise geographic, ethnographic (food), social and political cultural items, and, despite their intrinsic untranslatability, multiple translation strategies are possible (Osimo 2011 [1998]). Indeed, the appropriate sensorial representation of food items in a restaurant menu elicits the expected response in the customer (Wansink, van Ittersum, Painter 2005). Existing academic contributions examine restaurant menus translated into English as a means for international communication, and as transactional materials (Grammenidis 2008; Guzzo 2014) within a recognised intercultural practice that targets native English speakers, as well as international ones.

### 3. Methodological Framework Applied to the Source Text. Preliminary Analysis

After an overview of the theoretical background of this study, this section debates the methodological approach devised to translate the examples from the food items of the Florentine restaurant menu under examination. The methodology used combines translation studies, sociolinguistics, and text linguistics. It applies the concepts related to foreignizing vs. domesticating approach (Venuti 1995); functional equivalence (Nida 1964); levels of a text (phonological, morphological, lexical, semantic, enunciative, symbolic; cf. Binelli 2007 [2006]); axes of syntagmatic and paradigmatic selection out of the linguistic continuum (De Saussure 1964 [1916]; Jakobson, Halle 2002 [1956]); and the linguistic requirements to structure the English target text, among which, collocations and syntactic order (Biber, Johansson, Leech, *et al.* 1999).

A contextual analysis (Hatim 2009) of the target text is also necessary as far as its target cultural and publishing context, its purpose, its target reader, and its transactional function (if any) are concerned. This contextual analysis defines the type of experience to convey through the text in terms of audience design and of the experience to recreate in the target audience (readers/customers) to transfer the experience of the source text and of the source audience (readers/customers). It is also worth remembering that every text is biased, as it is “a matter of choice”, of conscious selections made by the author/-s.

These methodological tools combined aim at producing a “context-aware translation”, a finalised target text that takes into account multiple analytical steps related to its source and target contexts, and that has adapted its choices according to: an appropriate degree of either foreignizing or domesticating approach; an equivalence of the functions of both the source text and the target text; and a clearly identifiable target reader type.

These tools can be summarised as a set of analytical steps, with each step elaborating questions, as outlined in the three tables below, the answers are not provided here as they vary according to the text under examination:

| Steps                   | Questions  |
|-------------------------|--|
| 1. Situational analysis | Who is my target reader?   |
|                         | What is my text doing?   |
|                         | What is the aim of my text?  |
|                         | Where is my text happening? (context/aim of the context/ reader)     |
|                         | How do I help customers visualise what their food item will be like? |
|                         | What if the visualisation is repellent to customers?                 |

Tab. 1 – Situational analysis

| Steps                  | Questions   |
|------------------------|---|
| 2. Linguistic analysis | What is my main content?                          |
|                        | Which are the key concepts?                       |
|                        | How do I tie them together?                       |
|                        | How do I balance the weight/focus of my sentence? |
|                        | Which textual structures do I detect?             |
|                        | How do I create a cohesive text?                  |

Tab. 2 – Linguistic analysis

| Steps                  | Questions   |
|------------------------|---|
| 3. Structural analysis | Are there any specific structure limits to my text?   |
|                        | To which text typology do I need to conform my target text? What are its features and requirements? |
|                        | Where am I turning to my research activity on text types? (same outlet in the target language)      |

Tab. 3 – Structural analysis

These steps are applicable to multiple text types to process source texts effectively, in various translation contexts – to highlight their most relevant components, and successively encode them in target texts that achieve a high level of functional, or dynamic, equivalence. The analysis thus conducted aims to identify the semantic, syntactic and stylistic features of the source text that need to be negotiated to process the text and to prepare the strategic moves to be applied in the actual translation, as will be demonstrated in the next section where examples are discussed.

#### 4. Analysis of Examples from a Traditional Florentine Restaurant

The text under examination is a traditional Florentine restaurant menu. The menu features many different traditional dishes, divided in the usual categories of starters, first courses, second courses, side dishes, desserts, and drinks. Due to the limited scope of this contribution, I will concentrate on a couple of significant examples of ethnographical culture-gap terms taken from the lists of starters and of first courses.

Among the many available, equally challenging for translators could be *Lardo di cinta senese DOP*, among the starters, and the well-known *ribollita*, extremely frequent in the restaurants of Florence and its surroundings. Both are noun phrases composed of culture-bound terms. The various lexical components of *Lardo di cinta senese DOP* could be entirely obscure to its readers and potential tasters. Expanding on the analysis of the starter, *Lardo di cinta senese DOP*, the noun phrase *lardo* presents some potentially negative connotative issues. Despite having a codified translation with *lard*, the *lardo* of this specific starter is very different from it. A visual search using commonly available search engines like Google, for example, produces misleading images for the target readers/customers. As it is known, *lard* refers to fat from the abdomen of a pig, rendered and clarified for cooking, and it is more similar to a white thick cream. Therefore, using *lard* to translate *lardo* is mistranslation. Due to similar morphological features occurring in *lard* and *lardo*, a possible solution to eliminate any visual similarities between the two food items would imply right modifying *lardo* with a co-occurring noun phrase *cold cuts*. This way, the readers/customers can immediately disassociate any visualisation related to *lard* from *lardo*.

*Cinta senese* is another component of the noun phrase that presents another ethnographic realia. *Cinta senese* is a breed of pig, which has a typical white belt around their mid-section, referred to as *cinta*, the local vernacular for *cintura* (*belt*), coming from the areas around Siena (with *senese* meaning *Siennese*). Due to the peculiarities of this food item, a foreignizing approach is needed, together with explicatory additions that mediate the otherwise entirely foreignized translation. The acronym *DOP*, standing for *Denominazione di Origine Protetta*, has its own codified translation, which is *Protected Designation of Origin* (*PDO*).

A possible translation takes into account the structural limits of the graphic layout as well, which impedes a full explanation of the starter, but needs to negotiate the linguistic materials that can actually be translated. A solution could be *PDO lardo cold cuts of Cinta Senese breed*, where *lardo* and *Cinta Senese* remain as ethnographic realia, integrated in a more domesticating approach that makes use of an explicatory addition to the phrase (*breed*) to suggest the readers/customer that *Cinta Senese* is a breed of pigs, by also making use of capital letters.

This translation partially relies on the explanation of the waiters, who might be willing to share their advice and personal experience. However, it is important to carefully select those few menu items where the intervention of the waiters would be beneficial, since they might add extra work during peak time. Leaving

source language word items is also a way for readers/customers to learn about local food and local cultural identity, which is part of travel experiences intended as personal growth.

The second item selected for the analysis, *ribollita*, presents translators with similar issues of potentially negative connotation, if not translated after careful considerations. *ribollita* has become famous over the last few years among incoming tourists, but not famous enough. Unlike *polenta*, which has entered the Oxford English Dictionary, and therefore the target culture, and is also commonly mentioned as non-integrated foreign word in websites such as *BBC Good-Food*<sup>1</sup>, *ribollita* still lacks such linguistic recognition. Occurrences are found of *Tuscan-style ribollita*, which is not thoroughly understandable to the target readers, unless they have already tasted *ribollita* in Tuscany before.

Inexperienced translators might be tempted to translate *ribollita* with *vegetable soup*. Despite being, generally speaking, a soup made of vegetables, its preparation and ingredients make it unique, and very different from what is intended with vegetable soup. The name itself, in its literal translation, means *twice boiled*, because the original soup was boiled multiple times after its original preparation. It is therefore crucial to provide some elements that convey the unique identity of *ribollita*. Its ingredients and appearance provide relevant linguistic elements to be added for clarification and to make the readers/customers aware that *ribollita* is a vegetable soup which differs from its preconceived idea of a vegetable soup. One of its main characteristics is the inherent thickness of *ribollita*, together with its strong savoury taste. Since it is also slowly cooked, the right-modifier noun phrase *vegetable stew* might be added, in a domesticating effort to help the readers/customers anticipate the visual picture and the “visual taste” of *ribollita*. Therefore, a possible translation could be *ribollita savoury vegetable stew*, where the culture-bound term *ribollita* is preserved to help the readers/customers familiarise with local food traditions.

## 5. Final Remarks

These examples were discussed to show a glimpse of the inherent complexity of the translation of restaurant menus, which are a strong expression of cultural identities. The linguistic peculiarities of each example were according to the equivalent functions expected by their target readers, the degree of foreignization or domestication required by the source text and context, and by its readers/customers. These suggested translations and the preliminary analysis that prepares the translation process are functional to a well-defined context of perusal – a local restaurant, willing to attract English-speaking tourists and to help them experience the traditional cuisine, while selling traditional menu items filled with culture-bound terms.

<sup>1</sup> <<https://www.bbcgoodfood.com>> (02/2024).

Further research should be conducted using menus as a practical tool for translators to generate more ideas and strategies to make menus a true intercultural bridge connecting different identities. Restaurant menus, when translated appropriately, offer a deeper and more impactful food experience that contributes to fulfil, on the one hand, the expectations of readers/customers, and, on the other hand, to learn and appreciate cultural differences. Using menus to educate tourists and complement their experience of foreign cultures improves not only their experience of local restaurants, but also the experience of the restaurant staff. Therefore, menus help cultures to interact over one of the most basic human needs, food, and they can be used to learn about identity, cultural preservation and nourishment.

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