LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL ISSUES
OF GASTRONOMIC DISCOURSE TRANSLATION

Inga STOIANOVA
Free International University of Moldova

Culinary practice seems to represent the essence of human civilization. The transmission of culinary heritage both in writing and orally resulted in appearance of a food-related specific language, which has developed into a complex cultural product subject to climate, geography, pleasure and health. Gastronomic speech translation is challenging since it requires making decision on the choice between translating culinary terms and keeping their external form as in the source language.

Key words: gastronomic discourse, recipe, menu, descriptive translation, transliteration, calque.

Food is only one aspect of cultural traditions, yet it is probably one of the most persistent. Food plays an inextricable role in our daily lives as it is a source of pleasure, comfort and security, a symbol of hospitality, social status, and religious significance. What people select to eat, how they prepare it, serve it, and even how they eat it are all factors profoundly touched by their individual cultural inheritance. (http://www.aboutus.org/Food-Links.com)

Recipes and names of dishes, as signs of national identity and self-identity can describe people by what they eat. Let’s remember Brillat-Savarin’s aphorism, which everyone cites: ‘Tell me what you eat and I’ll tell you who you are.’ Each nation is associated with certain dish. So, the Russians have the image of the consumer of borshch, caviar and vodka. Germans tend to eat heavy and hearty meals that include ample portions of meat and bread and got the reputation of eaters of sauerkraut sausages and beer, while falafel became a kind of icon of Israeli cuisine. The Greeks are known for their dolmades (stuffed grape leaves); an egg and lemon soup called avgolemono; meat, spinach, and cheese pies; moussaka (a meat and eggplant dish); souvlaki (lamb on a skewer) and baklava (nut-and-honey pastry wrapped in layers of thin dough called phyllo). The Italians are famous throughout the world for pizza, pasta, and tomato sauce, and two uniquely Japanese foods are sushi (fresh raw seafood with rice) and sashimi, a fresh raw seafood with soy sauce. (http://www.foodbycountry.com/Germany-to-Japan/Germany.html)

According to Dara Goldstein, food is a social process rather than a commodity and thus is central to multicultural understanding: “Food has to do with how we live and it’s not just an object that we ingest”. (http://orias.berkeley.edu/2011/FoodIdentityCulture.pdf)
Because of the centrality of food in our lives, many cults and religions impose feast days and fast days, and may list acceptable and prohibited foods. Special occasions, from funerals to weddings, from festivals and fairs to political holidays and religious celebrations - all of these would diminish in pleasure and importance if food were not a consideration. Various foods are given symbolic and even transformative connotations, and there is still no shortage of publications promising that a “magic food” will alleviate pain, increase sexual function, and promise almost everything but life after death. The ability to control one's appetite, in many aspects of life, but especially regarding food, may also be indicative of social status, and more recently is seen as critical for health and longevity.

As the topic of our paper is the features of gastronomic discourse translation it would be useful to explain briefly the meaning of the concept “discourse”. Cook defines discourse as a language that “has been used to communicate something and is felt to be coherent” as opposed to language that has been “abstracted in order to teach a language or literacy, or to study how the rules of language work”. (Cook 6) Discourse is then any stretch of language that has been used to communicate something and shows coherence. It can be a formal speech, a scientific article, a dialogue between two people or a note written on a scrap of paper. Cook further points out that a discourse does not necessarily have to be grammatically perfect, e.g. informal conversation, what is important is its communicative value.

Gastronomic discourse, however, is a system that reflects the peculiarities of the national culture, has the social and gender characteristics and represents a special type of communication, which uses some professionally oriented signs, terminology, set expressions and special morphosyntactic structures.

Taking into consideration the socio-cultural context, this type of discourse is a combination of communication, cooking recipe text and context. The structure of gastronomic discourse usually includes: the participants, time-space criterion, goals, the value, strategies, precedent texts and discursive formula.

The participants of gastronomic discourse are the author (a person with great experience, skills, abilities and knowledge of cooking) and the client who is going to cook or eat anything. The time - space criterion of the discourse is clearly determined: the time corresponds to the meals of the person (breakfast, lunch, dinner).

The purposes of gastronomic discourse include two items:

- The training (transfer of skills), introduction to the culinary culture and traditions of other nations;
- The assessment of a recipe based on one’s experience. The assessment is usually followed by the expression of personal opinion, which may be either sensory tasteful or aesthetic as well as beneficial one.

The values of discourse are based on two aspects:

1) The process of cooking: pragmatic (everyday, usual), ritual (light breakfast, festive breakfast, an intimate dinner, dinner for two, a festive dinner) and aesthetic;
2) The class differences in food consumption.

Gender aspect is one of the characteristic features of gastronomic discourse as the notion of gender represents a complex network of cultural, psychological and social aspects. Interpersonal relations between men and women are typically stereotyped: the woman plays the role of mother and wife, she is a good hostess,
and is able to do any work. As the kitchen is the place, the kingdom of women, in
male’s vision the concept of food is also associated with women.

As our article is devoted to the rendering of gastronomic realities in different
languages, it is necessary to give some hints on the relationship between translation
and culture. It is generally agreed that translation is not only a linguistic activity
but a cultural one as well. (Toury 26) The notion of culture is essential to
considering the implications for translation and, despite the differences in opinion
as to whether language is part of culture or not, the two notions appear to be
inseparable.

Discussing the problems of correspondence in translation, Nida confers equal
importance to both linguistic and cultural differences between the SL and the TL
and concludes that “differences between cultures may cause more severe
complications for the translator than do differences in language structure”. (Nida
130) It is further explained that parallels in culture often provide a common
understanding despite significant formal shifts in the translation. The cultural
implications for translation are thus of significant importance as well as lexical
ones concern. The cultural element is extremely important in the case of menu
translations; it is often impossible to find an exact equivalent for those menu items
that belong exclusively to the source culture. The translator is faced with common
problems of non-equivalence such as culture-specific concepts, semantically
complex source language words and concepts not lexicalized in the target
language. (Baker 21)

If translations are to be functional, that is, if they are to fulfill a given
communicative purpose in the situation and culture in which they are received,
translators must have not only a good command of the languages involved but also
good knowledge of the field the text belongs to and some background knowledge
about the source and target cultures. (Nord 12)

Restaurants serve a diverse customer base, so having menus in only one
language is often a hindrance – after all, even communities without a significant
amount of tourism often include multiple spoken languages. To avoid losing
business because of language barriers, savvy restaurant owners take advantage of
professional menu translation. No matter what style of food is served, using
multilingual menus allows restaurants to cater to a wider variety of diners in a
language they’re comfortable with, which can entice new customers as well as
encourage repeat business.

This paper attempts to classify the peculiarities of translation of names of
dishes from English into Russian and Romanian; the examples were selected
through the World Wide Web.

Translating recipes and menus appears to be a simple task at first sight, but
that is only one’s first impression. Speaking about the methods of translation of
menus, one has to mention three of the most frequently used ones: transliteration,
loan translation (calque), as well as descriptive translation. Transliteration
introduces us the names of dishes, unusual for national cuisine, such as, for
example, Worcestershire sauce or roast beef. It should be noted that transcription is
not always appropriate and the interpreter must use the combined technique –
transliteration and description. Descriptive translation is used when the meaning of
the word is impossible to be understood without comment, for example, savoury
omelette – омлет с душистыми травами or brownie – шоколадное пирожное с
орехами; piccalilli – маринад из нарезанных овощей и острых приправ.
Loan translation preserves the semantics of the culinary term, but it does not always render the national flavor. For example, the name *shepherd's pie* in Russian sounds пастушьий пирог, Romanian *placinta ciobanului*, but it does not say anything to the Russian/Romanian-speaking clients, so it's best equivalent may be картофельная запеканка с бараниной (Ru) or carne de miel tocată cu cartofi și spanac (Ro).

Each of the techniques of translation of gastronomic reality has its advantages and disadvantages. Using transliteration, the translator keeps the exotic flavor, but does not assume any responsibility for the content. Loan translation involves literalism and the loss of national coloring; descriptive translation increases the length of text that is not always advisable. In these circumstances, combined methods of translation are used. For example, the gastronomic reality, translated by semi-loan translation (calque and transliteration or calque and description), can be widely spread in the language, but remains an “exotic word”, since the corresponding denotation is alien to the culture: *cucumber sandwich* is rendered into Russian as ежедневный с огурцом or *Swiss roll* is a jelly roll, a type of sponge roll spread with jam, rolled up, and served in circular slices (швейцарский рулет - бисквитный рулет с джемом или кремом (Ru); руладă си кремă /dulceată/gem – Ro).

The first difficulty of translating the menu is that the name familiar to us may not quite convey the specifics of foreign dishes, and even distort it. Thus, the translation of the menu is complicated by the fact that the translator has to translate gastronomic realities of the country, where certain cuisine has emerged. Most frequently the names of the dishes are rather transliterated or are provided with detailed explanations. For example, while seeing the Greek word *moussaka* in the menu the customer has absolutely no idea of the dish, thus, the translator has to introduce the description of the dish *moussaka*- layers of aubergine and minced meat topped with Béchamel sauce.

Sometimes euphony of dishes’ names is extremely important for the success of the restaurant, but the accuracy of translation should be preserved. Many beautiful names of delicious dishes in French lose the appeal as an aftermath of translation. For example, french *nuage de pommes de terre* having a great euphonic effect and being translated as *cloud of potatoes* vanishes its effect. While *veal liver with échalotes aux vieux balsamique* sounds fabulously but its English equivalent *Veal liver and shallots with old balsamic vinegar* seems to be out-of-date as the visitors of restaurants prefer to eat fresh food, therefore, the vinegar is mature.

The name of a very specific English dish Somerset *lamb chops* sounds appetizing in English and has a certain aesthetic impact on the English eater. However, translation of this dish in Russian as *сомерсетские отбивные котлеты из баранины* loses its impact. Russian equivalent has no impact on Russian restaurant customers, because they do not understand in what way usual Russian cutlets differ from the Somerset ones. The difference is in the ingredients used and the way of cooking.

Another aspect the translator deals with is the indifference to food, unusual ingredients and lack of knowledge in the object of translation. This issue can be partially solved by studying specialized dictionaries and searching the Internet accessing dozens of foreign and gourmet cookbooks, recipes, websites and forums. It is also important to talk with the chef, who made the menu and specify every
nuance of cooking, to understand the way the dish is cooked in order to find or to “invent” the appropriate word formula.

It should be mentioned that the semantics of gastronomic realities is sometimes ambiguous, and although the components of dishes’ names seem to be familiar, difficulties may arise in translation. For example, *confit tomatoes* is rendered into Russian as *запеченные томаты* not *континюр из томатов*, while translating *crispy basil* one can only guess that only *fresh basil* is crispy. In some cases English dish name should be deciphered in Russian in a more complete and detailed way. For example, *semolina dusted squid with smoked paprika oil* becomes *колоца кальмар в кляре с ароматным оливковым маслом, настоянным на конченой патрике*, but not *обсыпанные манкой кальмары в конченом масле с паприкой*.

English polysemantic words can cause great difficulties in translation of menus. For example, the word *delicatessen* is not just a delicacy, but it also denotes cold snacks. The famous English *pudding* has several variations ranging from any sweet dish to any cooked sausage in Scotland and the North of England.

Another pitfall of semantic translation lies in the ambiguity of the lexical unit, when the common meaning takes the second place. Therefore it is necessary to check carefully the recipe and according to it to translate the name of the dish. For example, *plum pudding* this is not pudding made from plums (Russian *сливовый пудинг*/ Romanian *prajitură cu prune*), but raisin pudding (Russian *пудинг с изюмом*/ Romanian *budincă cu stafide*), as the word *plum* can be seldom used as *raisin*. Therefore, knowledge of gastronomic realities supposes involvement of background information, study of the ingredients and methods of cooking.

Some words acquire gastronomic value without implying the original meaning of the word. For example, the word *devil* for a specialist in cooking means a dish, a bone with the meat, broiled and excessively peppered (a grill with Cayenne pepper), while for the translator it is absolutely impossible to guess the meaning of this term without consulting the specialized literature. In the absence of necessary culinary knowledge the translator may improperly render the names, which at first sight seem to be literal. For example, *cold duck* is not a cold duck proper but a drink made of sparkling burgundy and champagne, while *bombay duck* is a small dried fish served in curry sauce (Russian *взвешенная рыба кари под островой приправой карри*). Thus, the names of dishes cannot always be translated simply as the sum of its constituent words.

It should be noted that in the vocabulary of the English menu of restaurants one can find names of dishes, which contain the product name, that seems to facilitate the translator’s work, but it is not so. The semantic method of translation cannot be applied when the purpose of translation is to encourage the customer to order the dish, because the original product may be unfamiliar to the customer. The so-called *equivalent* translation would have zero information content for the customer who may not know what it is, for example, *lumpfish roe* (a North Atlantic lumpsucker, the roe of which is sometimes used as a substitute for caviar - Russian *укра пинагора*) or *rocket salad* (Russian *салат из рукколы*/ Romanian *salată din rucola/ ruchetă*).

Menus also represent exceptional, infinite, sometimes witty or even unintelligent examples of gaffes in translation based on language and culture interference. In a restaurant, a menu is a presentation of food and beverage
offerings. A part of the function of menu prose is to impress the customers with the
notion that the dishes served at the restaurant require such skill, equipment, and
exotic ingredients that the diners could not prepare similar foods at home. In some
cases, ordinary foods are made to sound more exciting by successful replacing
everyday terms with their English equivalent. In other cases, especially on
rendering the names of oriental food and dishes the translation blunders may make
the visitor lose one’s appetite and even leave the eating place. Further we give
some genuine examples of rendering the names of coffee types from Italian into
English:
- caffè espresso > express coffee (should be espresso, espresso coffee);
- cappuccino del-orzo > cappuccino del-barley (decaffeinated coffee or barley
coffee, perhaps, as decaffeinated barley simply doesn’t exist);
- caffè corretto > correct coffee (sic!) (> coffee laced with liquor);
- caffè shakerato > coffe (sic!) shook (> coffee mixed in a shaker; it might be
rendered as shakered coffee).

In Bulgaria there is a traditional sausage called banski starets (a kind of
sausage made of chopped meat), which literally means Old man from Bansko
(Bansko is a mountain resort in Bulgaria). However, while looking at a menu, this
dish was mistranslated into English as grilled old man from Bansko. They also
served constipated potatoes in Bulgaria (запечени картофи) instead of slightly
roasted ones.

In Amsterdam a pizzeria advertised their menu translated into English for all
the passing tourists and offered (amongst others) pizza with little hairdressers
which meant pizza with capers. The Dutch word for capers is kappertjes, but
cappertjes can also be the diminutive for kappers (hairdressers). Hence the
translator got the pizza with little hairdressers.

Another interesting example is found in believed ham which is the English
version of French jambon cru. The word cru in French can mean various things:
raw, vintage (for wine) and, among other meanings, believed, as the past participle
of the verb croire.

Even though the above examples sound quite comical by themselves, they
also serve to illustrate how easy it is for translators to make bad translations out of
their work. As such, they should be aware of the indispensability of context in their
line of work.

Therefore, as gastronomic realities carry out an implicit linguocultural
information, the translator must carefully investigate the subject from cultural and
linguistic positions. It is obvious that not only the cognitive amount of information
that must be translated, but also the hidden side of the name of the dish, as well as
the aesthetic aspect of the translation. However, the translator has to keep in his
mind that the name of the dish should be euphonic and intriguing, and encourage
the client to order it.

Notes

Brillat-Savarin was a French lawyer, politician, and gourmand whose obsessive interest in
food matters led him to write The Physiology of Taste, considered one of the earliest and
most famous collections of gastronomic essays. Brillat-Savarin’s book presents meditations
on key elements affecting gastronomy- the art of choosing, cooking, and eating good
food—including the role of the senses, the concept of “taste,” and eclectic matters such as the erratic virtues of truffles.

Bibliographical references


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