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Is it all Cods? – The Art of Translating Culture-Specific Food Terms

Gre le za polenovke? – Prevajanje kulturno-specifičnih terminov s področja kulinarike

“No one can understand the word cheese unless he has also a non-linguistic acquaintance with cheese.” (Bertrand Russell, 1872–1970)

Abstract

The article focuses on the difficulties translators might encounter when rendering menu cards into a foreign language. This is especially the case when it comes to culture-specific food terms. The paper points out major concepts to deal with this problem and provides a case study as regards a Southern Austrian national dish which is unique all over the world in its ingredients, its shape and way of serving.

Povzetek

Članek obravnava težave, s katerimi se lahko srečamo pri prevajanju jedilnih listov v tuji jezik. Te so še posebej pereče, ko naletimo na kulturno-specifične termine s področja kulinarike. Članek opozarja na temeljne pojme pri obravnavi problema in ponuja študijo primera, ki zadeva prevajanje južnoavstrijske narodne jedi, edinstvene na svetu po svojih sestavinah, obliki in načinu postrežbe.

1. Introduction

Culture, as Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines it, is, inter alia, 'the characteristic features of everyday existence' – and what is more everyday life than food? Food is indeed "for many the most sensitive and important expression of national culture" (Newmark 1988: 97).

1.1. Translation strategies

When translating culture-specific terms, e.g. food terms in restaurant menus, the translator is soon faced with various problems:

There is often no one-to-one correspondence between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL) since, as a matter of fact, different cultures have different food. So, how, for example, will the translator render *Kletze* into English for someone who has never experienced it? One solution would be an intralingual translation – in Jakobson's terms (1959/2000: 114) – meaning that the translator clarifies what *Kletze* means by explaining that it is 'small pieces of dried pear'. For the understanding of *Kletze* it is, therefore, sufficient to know that fruit can be dried.

When the translator, not necessarily in a written context, adds with hindsight: "as you do it also with grapes, for example", this technique,

i.e. using co-hyponyms as reference, is called chunking-sideways and is described by Katan (1999: 147-57).

2. Menu Translation – a Sample Case

“It is generally agreed that translation is not only a linguistic activity but also a cultural one as well. The cultural element is extremely important in the case of menu translations because it is often quite impossible to find an exact equivalent for items that belong exclusively to the source culture.” (Fallada Pouget: 1998).

Before you start translating a menu, you have to ask yourself what the optimum rendering for your target reader, the guest, might be. Basically, what a menu has to do is satisfying the needs of the guests in presenting what the restaurant has to offer in order to allow the guest to make his or her choice.

Luckily, there are quite some concepts of food and dishes shared and understood internationally, e.g. *pizza*, *hamburger*, *paella*, etc. However, there are still many national dishes that do not have counterparts in other cultures, nor are there any translation equivalents to be found.

Take *Kärntner Käsnudel* or, more dialectal, *Kärntner Kasnudl*, for example. This is the national dish of Carinthia, the southernmost federal state of Austria. The *Kärntner Käsnudel* are unique all over the world in their taste and shape. How will the translator tackle this?

Newmark (1988: 96) suggests two opposing methods: transference and componential analysis. Transference means that the original term is directly transferred to the TL in order to give “local colour”, as Newmark (*ibid.*) puts it, and keep the cultural concept intact but, he notes, this method may cause problems of intelligibility to the target reader, in our case, the guest. He describes componential analysis as “the most accurate translation procedure, which excludes the culture and highlights the message” (*ibid.*).

Equivalent to James’s (2002) comments on translation problems with *Sidi Brahim*, a low-quality Algerian wine that has a special, derogatory connotation in France, our guest, when opening the menu card and coming across the transferred *Kärntner Kasnudl* will definitely not know what this dish is since “by using strictly formal equivalence, all meaning gets lost” (*ibid.*). Introducing componential analysis as translation concept, the guest may be offered ‘a kind of pasta filled with cheese’.

Alternatively, Graedler (2000) offers some more possibilities within the cline of transference and componential analysis. One of these options available to the translator is to create a new word, to directly translate the term from the SL into the TL, also called loan translation: *Carinthian cheese noodles*. However, in this case, this option rather failed its purpose since *noodle*, by definition of the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, is ‘a very thin, long strip of pasta or a similar flour paste, usually eaten with a sauce or in a soup’. Then again, the Austrian dish does NOT consist of very thin, long strips of pasta and they are NOT eaten in soup.

Another option, according to Graedler (*ibid.*), since no English equivalent exists in this case, is to just leave the term unaltered, maybe in quotes or italics, and to add a explanatory comment: “*Kärntner Käsnudel*” – *ravioli-like pasta filled with cheese*.

Unfortunately, the story does not end here. Quite the contrary is true since, when a term, as here, is culture-bound, we have to “bear in mind the inevitability of translation loss” (James 2002) – even if the meaning of the term is (or seems to be) explained in the translation.

Provided that the guest knows what *pasta* is, or, even better, has an understanding of the concept of *ravioli*¹, the concept of *Kärntner Käsnudel* is still not properly framed. For example, cheese, in its prototypical perception, is solid food, whereas the cheese used for the Carinthian national dish is a soft one. So, another important aspect in translating restaurant menus is “to determine how much missing back-

¹ Defined as ‘small pasta squares filled with meat or cheese’ in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*.

ground information should be provided by the translator" (ibid.).

Every Carinthian, or Austrian in general, would know that the cheese in *Kärntner Käsnudel* is a soft one, although, also for them, cheese is prototypically solid. This might be because the type of cheese used for the *Käsnudel* is typically not referred to as *cheese* in German, neither Austrian nor German German – although the *Käs-* definitely should be rendered as *cheese* in English. However, the German language sees the kind of cheese in this dish as belonging to a different kind of foodstuffs, as (according to *Duden – Deutsches Universalwörterbuch*) 'aus saurer Milch hergestelltes, weißes, breiiges Nahrungsmittel', viz. 'a white thick paste made from sour milk'.

Should the translator tell the guest that, in this case, *cheese* is not the solid food one would normally expect? Here, the question of accuracy vs. simplicity arises. The simplest solution is to leave *cheese* in the explanatory comment, while the best, and more accurate, would be to define this special type of cheese for the target reader with no cultural background.

If the translator wants the guest to know which kind of "cheese" is filled into the *Käsnudel*, which translation will he or she go for? There is indeed no one-to-one equivalence given between German and English... The best near-synonym for the German *Topfen*² is *curd cheese* in English, yet, will the average guest know what *curd cheese* is, or, should the translator apply chunking-up – in Katan's terms (1999: 147-57), i.e. putting the specific term into a more general context: *soft cheese?* (cf. Schwarz 2003).

How much background information does the guest actually need? Does he or she need to know that *Kärntner Käsnudel* are additionally filled with small pieces of potato and onion, not to mention the herbs in there? Well, as, primarily in these days, allergies to special ingredients in food have developed *en masse*, yes, the ingredients should also be given along with the translation.

² Here it must be added that the Austrian German *Topfen* in German or Swiss German is *Quark*.

But does the TL guest also need to know exactly which herbs are used – just because the people in Austria simply know about it? Definitely not³. But, what is more important about background information and translation loss is the way the dish is served.

Kärntner Käsnudel always come with melted or browned butter and a side salad. So, if the menu is intended for guests in the SL, a simple listing of the term *Kärntner Käsnudel* is enough.

The menu for the TL guest, however, has to make sure he or she gets to know this "most natural thing in the world" in culture-specific terms and it is, ultimately, the translator who decides "how much may be left for the reader to simply infer" (James 2002).

2.1. Translated menu entries and how English native speakers perceive them

Admittedly, at very short notice, I sent a questionnaire to native speakers of American English. Taking five different translations of Carinthian menu cards⁴, I asked them to tell which translation(s) of *Kärntner Käsnudel*, i.e. listing in the menu, they would go for (yes) and which one(s) they would not go along with (no).

(a) "Kärntner Käsnudel" – Pasta Carinthian Style (Pasta stuffed with curd cheese, potatoes and assorted herbs, served with brown butter and salad)

(b) Cheese noodles with salad (boiled patties with cottage cheese)

(c) Carinthian mixed boiled patties served with salad

(d) "Kärntner Käsnudel" – large parcel of pasta dough filled with cheese

³ The herbs in *Käsnudel* are mint and chervil.

⁴ The translations are taken from (a) Hotel Fischgasthof Jerolitsch, latest one, which I was commissioned to do (b) Hotel Fischgasthof Jerolitsch, a previous one (c) Hotel Fischgasthof Jerolitsch; Taylor Sprachservice, Klagenfurt (d) <http://travel.yahoo.com/p-travelguide-777535-austria_austrian_food_and_drink_glossary-i> (e) <<http://www.press-kaernten.at/laender/englisch/18Kulinarik.shtml>>

(e) "Kärntner Käsnudel" – ravioli filled with curd cheese

As multiple postings were allowed, I got 14 "yes" for (a), followed by 9 "yes" for (b), 5 "yes" for (e). Regarded as being the worst were (c) and (d) with 7 "no".

What do the results tell us? Basically, the subjects went for the original term plus an accurate explanation (a). Surprisingly, (b) with the (inadvertently wrong) one-to-one translation ranks second – this may be due to the more accurate explanation in brackets (although cottage cheese – which has nothing to do with the cheese in *Kärntner Käsnudel* – is mentioned here).

The reason why (c) and (d) rank lowest might be that (c) does not hint at the nature of the filling, while (d)'s *large parcel* probably misleads the reader.

3. Food Terms and Loan Translations

As pointed out in the above stated observation with the difficulties in appropriately translating *Kärntner Käsnudel* we see that "indeed, the very fact that one culture lacks the words and expressions for things that exist in other cultures is one of the main motivations for borrowing." (Graedler 2000). These include, world-wide known examples such as *pizza*, *hamburger*, *paella*.

Also, the Austrian cuisine is a donor to such "culinary internationalisms". Take the famous Austrian pastry *Apfelstrudel*, for example. The (cultural) concept of *Strudel* (whether or not filled with apple) is perceived in the same way in, at least, France, Great Britain, Italy and the US, since the standard monolingual dictionaries, *Le Petit Robert*, *The Oxford Dictionary of English*, *DeAgostini – Dizionario della Lingua Italia* and *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, all list *strudel* as culinary term taken from (Austrian) German via borrowing.

Another such example is *schnitzel*, although only adapted to American and British English. In the British English sense, *schnitzel* is referred

to in *The Oxford Dictionary of English* as 'a thin slice of veal or other light veal, coated in bread-crumbs and fried'. This exactly corresponds to the famous Austrian *Wiener Schnitzel*, viz. 'Escalope Viennese Style'. In British English, thus, *schnitzel* is a clipped form of a direct loan translation of the Austrian *Wiener Schnitzel*, while the American *schnitzel*, in *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, denotes, as the German *Schnitzel*, a roast escalope only.

4. Conclusion

When translating a restaurant menu, the "clear directive" should be to fulfil the expectations of the guest in terms of an appropriate presentation of what the restaurant has to offer in order to allow the guest to make his or her choice.

So, "the first priority for translated menus must be (to be) informative, to bridge the often considerable distances between different language(s) and different cultures. A linguistically opaque menu may be exotic, but it can only convey this quality as a positive value if and when the reader has understood the general nature of the dishes." (Fallada Pouget 1998).

Still, also non-translated menus can make the choice of the guests easy – when intersemiotic translation is used (Jakobson 1959/2000: 114), meaning that verbal signs are interpreted by non-verbal signs, e.g. pictures.

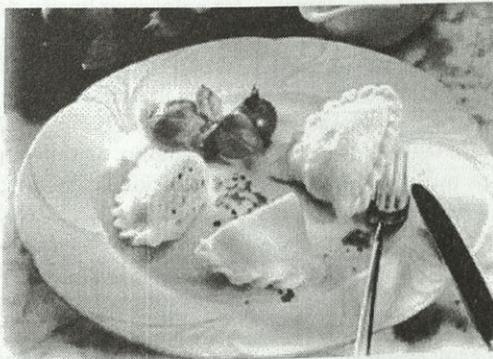
Considering all the thoughts brought up in this paper, the optimum way for presenting *Kärntner Käsnudel* to English speaking guests would be:

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"Kärntner Käsnudel" – Pasta Carinthian Style



Pasta stuffed with curd cheese, potatoes and assorted herbs
Served with melted or brown butter and a side salad