

CHALLENGES OF TRANSLATING MENUS FROM SERBIAN INTO ENGLISH

Denis Stojkanović¹ Ivana Ješić²

Abstract: Menu translation from Serbian into English drastically affects the dining experience of foreign tourists in Serbia. This paper explores the linguistic, cultural, and practical problems in menu translation, including the most common errors and ways of devising correct and culturally appropriate translations. Frequent errors in spelling, capitalization, word-for-word translation, and the use of culturally specific terms are signs that menu translations are frequently not professionally translated or revised. As a result, they endanger the restaurant's reputation and make it difficult to communicate with foreign tourists. Such issues are commonly caused by using machine translation technologies with limited knowledge of the target language and its culture. The paper emphasizes the need to preserve culinary authenticity while simultaneously ensuring clarity and appeal for English-speaking guests, using real-life case studies and relevant academic literature.

Key words: menus, translation, translation errors, culinary authenticity, culturally specific terms

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Serbia has seen a significant increase in the number of international tourists drawn to its vibrant culture, historical value, and gastronomic delights. This increased attention has placed an even greater importance on presenting Serbian cuisine to foreign guests in the best possible light, and accurate translations of menus are one of the most critical elements. Although the tourists come from various backgrounds and speak various languages, English is considered the lingua franca of the 21st century. [1] That is the reason why the majority of tourist texts, including menus, contain English translations. Menus are not just about listing dishes; they become cultural ambassadors, linking the country's culinary heritage to the expectations of English-speaking visitors. However, the work of translating menus from Serbian into English encounters numerous linguistic, cultural, and practical obstacles. Within the categorization of cultural references, food always occupies a significant position. Traditionally, food has also become one of the cultural symbols that reflect the historical roots of each country. Therefore, in translating cultural references including food-related items, they must use the right translation strategies to produce a good translation product. [2] This paper explores these complexities, providing strategies for developing translations that are at once authentic and clear, thus supporting a positive gourmet experience for everyone. In recent years, Serbia has welcomed growing numbers of tourists from around the world—drawn by its fertile culture, eventful past, and varied cuisine. The ability to present local gastronomy to foreign visitors satisfactorily often depends on menus translated correctly. A menu serves not only as a practical tool for ordering food but also as a means of communicating the culinary identity of a region. However, the translation process of menus from Serbian to English is burdened with many linguistic and cultural challenges. This paper explores such barriers and proposes methods for effective menu translation.

2. THE ROLE OF MENU TRANSLATION IN TOURISM

Menu is “the primary selling tool of any establishment that offers food and beverage for sale”, consisting of a list of units that can be ordered along with short descriptions of their ingredients, preparation and prices. [3] Menu translation can be important in building a dining establishment's perception, and contributing to a better tourist experience. A well-done translation can make the menu more accessible to people who do not speak Serbian, allowing them to fully understand and appreciate

¹ The College of Applied Studies in Management and Business Communications, Ratarski put 8a, Belgrade, denis.stojkanovic@mpk.edu.rs

² The College of Applied Studies in Management and Business Communications, Ratarski put 8a, Belgrade, ivana.jesic@mpk.edu.rs

what is offered. This, in turn, would also promote local cuisine through unique dishes and culinary traditions that foster appreciation for culture. Moreover, clear and accurate translations avoid misunderstandings, reducing the possibility of confusion that may lead to dissatisfaction. On the other hand, poorly translated menus might result in confusion, involuntary humor, or offense, which may discourage tourists from trying the local cuisine.

3. LINGUISTIC CHALLENGES IN MENU TRANSLATION

Menu translation presents several linguistic challenges that require careful consideration. One major issue is the lack of direct equivalents for many Serbian dishes in English. For instance, *ćevapi* is often described as "grilled minced meat rolls," and *sarma* as "stuffed cabbage rolls," yet these translations fail to convey the cultural significance, nuanced preparation, and unique taste of the dishes. Additionally, English menus frequently include culinary terms borrowed from other languages, such as French or Italian, posing a challenge for translators who must decide whether to retain the Serbian term, provide an English equivalent, or use a combination of both. Another challenge lies in translating key ingredients like *kajmak* or *ajvar*, which are deeply rooted in Serbian cuisine but unfamiliar to many English speakers. These require descriptive explanations that strike a balance between brevity and clarity, ensuring the essence of the ingredient is effectively communicated. Culinary heritage is crucial to the overall experience for any tourist, and, as such, it impacts the national competitiveness of a country in a global tourism market. [4]

4. COMMON ERRORS IN MENU TRANSLATION

4.1. Literal Translations

Literal translations often fail to convey the intended meaning. Examples include: "Fried cheese" for "prženi sir," which may evoke images of processed cheese rather than a homemade delicacy. "Meat under the bell" for "meso ispod sača," which requires cultural knowledge to understand.

4.2. Overuse of Loanwords

Relying heavily on untranslated Serbian terms can alienate English-speaking diners. For instance: "Ajvar" without explanation leaves non-Serbian speakers guessing its nature.

4.3. Spelling and Grammar Mistakes

Typographical errors and incorrect grammar reduce the credibility of the menu. Examples include "deserts" instead of "desserts."

4.4. Portion Size Confusion

Another common issue arises with the mistranslation of portion sizes, leading to either exaggerated or understated expectations. For example, "polovina porcije" might be rendered as "half portion," which could be misleading if the original portion size isn't clarified.

4.5. Regional Dish Names

Regional dish names are often mistranslated or oversimplified. For instance: "Šopska salata" might be translated as "salad," omitting its distinctive composition of tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, and cheese. "Leskovački roštilj" is frequently rendered as "barbecue," losing the regional specificity and unique style associated with Leskovac.

4.6. Misinterpretation of Preparation Methods

Errors also occur in conveying preparation techniques. For example: "Dimljeno meso" translated as "smoked meat" could confuse diners if the menu does not specify the type of meat or its traditional preparation style. By addressing these common errors, translators can significantly improve the clarity and appeal of menu translations, ensuring they meet the expectations of international diners while preserving cultural authenticity.

4.7. Strategies for Effective Menu Translation

Effective menu translation involves several key strategies to ensure accuracy, clarity, and cultural appropriateness. Collaboration with professional translators and culinary experts is crucial to achieve precise and culturally sensitive translations. Descriptive translation, which includes brief explanations alongside dish names (e.g., *Sarma*: "Cabbage leaves stuffed with minced meat and rice"; *Ajvar*: "A roasted red pepper spread"), helps clarify unfamiliar terms. Adding glossaries or footnotes can provide additional context without overcrowding the menu while maintaining consistency in terminology and style—such as consistently using "homemade" or "house-made"—ensures a cohesive and professional presentation. Lastly, cultural sensitivity is essential, as translators should avoid terms that might be misunderstood or offensive, thus creating a menu that resonates with a diverse audience.

5. CASE STUDIES

5.1. Successful Translations

Examples of effective menu translations in Serbian restaurants include: "Restaurant "Zavičaj": Offers detailed descriptions of traditional dishes, appealing to cultural tourists. For instance, their menu translates "gibanica" as "layered pie with cheese and eggs," adding a note that it is a beloved dish in Serbian households. "Mala Gostionica": Combines Serbian terms with English explanations, balancing authenticity and clarity. An example includes "kajmak" described as "a creamy dairy spread, similar to clotted cream." "Ambar": A modern Serbian restaurant chain that provides bilingual menus, using descriptive translations like "ćevapi" rendered as "grilled minced meat sausages, served with flatbread and chopped onions," ensuring both accuracy and appeal.

5.2. Learning from Errors

An analysis of poorly translated menus reveals patterns such as literal translations and lack of proofreading. Examples include: A restaurant from Belgrade listed "roasted kid" as a dish, which caused confusion and alarm among English-speaking diners. The intended meaning was "roasted young goat." A local café in Novi Sad translated "pohovani kačkavalj" as "fried cheese," which failed to convey the specific type of cheese used or its preparation method. A better translation might have been "breaded and fried yellow cheese, a Serbian specialty." Also, some typographical errors are very frequent such as "deserts" instead of "desserts" and incorrect grammar, including "grill fish" instead of "grilled fish," diminished the menu's credibility. By studying these examples, it becomes evident that professional translation services and thorough reviews are essential to avoid missteps and enhance customer satisfaction.

6. THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN MENU TRANSLATION

6.1. Machine Translation Tools

Machine translation tools like Google Translate and DeepL are widely used for initial translations due to their speed and accessibility. However, these tools often fail to account for cultural nuances or the specific terminology of Serbian cuisine. It is a common belief that menus can be successfully translated by anyone or even using machine translation such as Google Translate. Although machine translation is cost-effective and can help in the translation of simple words, it cannot replace a human translator when it comes to idiomatic expressions, culture-specific terms, and figurative expressions. [5] For instance, terms like "ćevapi" or "kajmak" may be rendered inaccurately, leading to confusion or misrepresentation of the dish. Translation is a "...mental and emotional process that includes feelings, cultural differences, and an understanding of the target country. [6] These are areas in which machines are likely to never surpass human beings." Despite technological advancements, human translators remain essential for capturing cultural and linguistic subtleties.

7. CONCLUSION

Food is for many the most sensitive and important expression of national culture; food terms are subject to the widest variety of translation procedures. Various settings: menus - straight, multilingual, glossed; cookbooks, food guides; tourist brochures; journalism increasingly contain foreign food terms. [7] Translating menus from Serbian to English is a complex task requiring linguistic expertise, cultural sensitivity, and attention to detail. By avoiding common pitfalls and employing best practices, restaurants can create menus that enhance the dining experience for international visitors, showcasing the richness of Serbian cuisine while meeting the expectations of English-speaking audiences. Key challenges include the lack of direct equivalents for certain dishes, cultural nuances, and the potential for misinterpretation. Strategies such as collaboration with professional translators, the use of descriptive translations, and the inclusion of glossaries have proven effective in overcoming these obstacles. Looking ahead, future research could focus on the role of artificial intelligence in improving menu translation quality, as well as the impact of well-translated menus on customer satisfaction and business success. Practical applications of these findings could include the development of tailored translation software specifically designed for the hospitality industry in Serbia. By embracing these strategies and exploring innovative solutions, the translation of menus can serve not only as a tool for communication but also as a bridge connecting cultures through the universal language of food. Translating menus from Serbian to English is a complex task requiring linguistic expertise, cultural sensitivity, and attention to detail. By avoiding common pitfalls and employing best practices, restaurants can create menus that enhance the dining experience for international visitors, showcasing the richness of Serbian cuisine while meeting the expectations of English-speaking audiences. The integration of professional translation services, coupled with thoughtful design, can transform menus into effective tools for promoting Serbia's culinary heritage.

8. REFERENCES

- [1] House, J. (2001). *Translation quality assessment: linguistic description versus social evaluation*. *Meta*, 46(2), 243–257. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7202/003141ar>
- [2] González-Vera, P. (2015). *Food for Thought: The Translation of Culinary References in Animation*. *Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura*, 20(2). <https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.ikala.v20n2a07>
- [3] Davis, B., Lockwood, A., Pantelidis, I., Alcott, P. (2013). *Food and Beverage Management*. London, Routledge.
- [4] Du Rand, G. (2006). *Towards a framework for food tourism as an element of destination marketing*. *Current Issues In Tourism* 9(3):206-234. DOI: 10.2164/cit/226.0
- [5] Ibanez, Frédéric (2022). Alphatrad.com. *Why should you translate restaurant menus using a professional expert?* Available at: <https://www.alphatrad.com/news/translate-restaurantmenu>
- [6] Vézinet, C. (2002) Translation tools. Watkins, J. *The Guide to Translation and Localization. Preparing Products for the Global Marketplace*. 28-32. Portland, Lingo Systems.
- [7] Newmark, Peter (1988) *A Textbook of Translation*. Exeter, Prentice Hall.