

Are Menu Translations Getting Worse?

Problems from Empirical Analysis of Restaurant Menus in English in the Tarragona Area

Carmina Fallada Pouget

Universitat Rovira i Virgili

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Resum

L'estudi de traduccions de cartes de restaurant del català o castellà a l'anglès és important per a la indústria catalana de restauració i per al turisme en general, ja que una millora de la qualitat de les traduccions pot portar a un servei de més qualitat i a un millor intercanvi sociocultural. Una mostra de 1.013 plats de l'àrea de Tarragona suggereix que hi ha diferències funcionals entre les cartes traduïdes als setanta i vuitanta i aquelles traduïdes als noranta. Una possible raó per justificar aquestes diferències és que totes les cartes dels setanta i vuitanta van ser traduïdes per traductors professionals, i les dels noranta, per traductors no professionals. L'estudi també suggereix que els llibres sobre traducció de cartes i menús publicats per la Generalitat el 1991 no semblen haver arribat als restauradors, i que la política oficial de traducció en aquesta àrea ha tingut poca incidència.

Paraules clau: traduccions, traductors, funcionalisme, restaurants.

Abstract

The study of translations of restaurant menus from Catalan or Spanish into English is important for the Catalan restaurant industry and for tourism in general, since an improvement in the quality of the translations may lead to higher standards of service and better socio-cultural exchanges. A sample of 1013 menu items from the Tarragona area suggests that there are differences in function between the menus translated in the 1970s/1980s and those translated in the 1990s. A possible reason for these differences is that all the menus from the 1970s/80s were translated by professional translators, and those from the 1990s, by non-professional translators. The study also suggests that the books on menu translations published by the Catalan government in 1991 did not seem to reach the restaurant owners and that official translation policy in this area has thus had little effect.

Key words: translations, translators, functionalism, restaurants.

Summary

Introduction

It is generally agreed that translation is not only a linguistic activity but a cultural one as well (Toury, 1995: 26). 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, 1992: 21-26). Translators have to decide what strategies and procedures they should use to solve these problems.

If translations are to be functional, that is, if they are to fulfil a given communicative purpose in the situation and culture in which they are received (Pöchhacker, 1995; Nord, 1991: 12), 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. In the case of menu translations in Catalonia, translators should have a good command of Catalan or Spanish and English, and some knowledge about Spanish and English cultures. Having some notions about food and restaurants would also help but if translators do not know enough about the field, they should at least be able to find the pertinent information.

Given these premises, we were interested in finding out how functional menu translations are in the Tarragona area, whether they fulfil their communicative purposes, how target-text readers react to them, who translates restaurant menus from Catalan or Spanish into English, and how non-equivalence problems are solved.

Menu translations from Catalan or Spanish into English can tell us something about the role English plays in this particular field in Spain, particularly as concerns the attitude that English readers may have towards them. Further, research on menu translations can provide suggestions as to how to improve the quality of these translations and can help to improve the role that menu translations play in satisfying the tourist's demand for better service. Our study has also tried to find out to what extent the books on vocabulary for restaurants published by the Generalitat de Catalunya (the Catalan government) in 1991, *Vocabulari de restaurants* and *Vocabulari de bars i restaurants-bar*, achieved one of their main purposes, namely, to help restaurant owners translate the menus themselves.

Initial attempts at answering the above questions led to the formulation of the following somewhat surprising hypothesis: *menus translated in the 1970s and 1980s are more functional than those done in the 1990s*. Our main goal here will be to substantiate or falsify this hypothesis, stressing the important links between «function of translations», «professionalism of translators» and «period in which the translations were done».

Method

This research began in late 1997 with the collection of fourteen restaurant menus from the Tarragona area, giving a total of 1,113 dishes (text fragments),

written both in Catalan or Spanish and English. This was followed up by an oral interview of the restaurant owners, who were asked the following questions:

- When was the translation done?
- Who did the translation?
- Did you pay any money for the translation?
- Have you heard about the books on vocabulary for restaurant menus published by the Generalitat in 1991?

Since it was very difficult for restaurant owners to remember the year in which the translation was done, they were asked to answer the first question by choosing between «1970s», «1980s», and «1990s». To the second question, they had to say whether the menus had been translated by «non-professional translators» (unpaid translators for whom this is not their regular work) or by «professional translators» (people who translate regularly and get paid for doing so). Answers to the third question were closely linked to the answer to the second: if the translations had been done by professionals, money had been paid to them and if they had been done by non-professionals, nothing had been paid to them. The owners were asked to say whether they had heard about the books published by the Generalitat. If their answer was «yes», they were asked to indicate when they had heard about the books, and whether they actually had them or not. Further minor questions were also asked to make the interview more personal.

The menus were then rated according to «correspondence of content» and «intelligibility». «Correspondence of content» was checked by the researcher, taking as a model the menu translations that appear in the above mentioned books published by the Generalitat.

The quality of the translations was assessed through the use of questionnaires. Two native English speakers were told that the researcher was interested in the way English speakers would react to English translations of restaurant menus. They were given a copy of the menus, only in English, and some instructions about how they had to rate them.

The first thing that was evaluated was the clarity of expression of the target text, that is, its linguistic qualities. The subjects were asked to say to what extent the language used in the translations made their reading difficult. The informants had to choose between the following answers:

- not at all (5)
- hardly (4)
- a little bit (3)
- quite a lot (2)
- a lot (1)
- almost impossible to understand (0)

They were then asked to say whether the non-linguistic content (the cultural element) made it difficult for them to make sense of the texts; they had

to decide to what extent the cultural gap between the Spanish or Catalan and English cultures made the reading of the translations difficult. They chose between the same options to the previous question.

It was immediately clear that the ratings of the menus from the 1970s/1980s were quite different from those of the 1990s. After checking whether there was correlation between the ratings of the two informants, t-tests were run to see whether the differences between the translations of these two periods were significant or not.

Results

Interviews with restaurant owners

Half of the fourteen menus were translated in the 1970s/1980s and the other half in the 1990s. It was found that all the translations from the 1970s/80s had been done by professional translators and all from those from the 1990s, by non-professionals. None of the restaurant owners had the Generalitat's books on vocabulary for restaurant menus and only two of them had heard about them. Only those who had had their menus translated by professional translators (half the sample) had paid a certain amount of money.

It should be noted that, although this was not one of the formal questions, both cheap and expensive restaurants have been found to have good and bad translations. Nor did the geographical area where the restaurants are located seem significant: in Tarragona, city of 100,000 inhabitants that received 210,000 tourists in 1995 (Generalitat, 1996: 46), we came across very good but also very bad translations. In theory, if restaurants are in tourist areas, they might be expected to have good translations, but this does not seem to be the case.

Content correspondence

In general there is adequate correspondence of content. However, there are cases in which the translator did not know how to render certain words or group of words and left them in Catalan or Spanish. This mainly happened with culture-specific terms, as can be seen in the following examples:

<i>Original</i>	Gambas al ajillo (Spanish)
<i>Translation</i>	Shrimps to the ajillo
<i>Original</i>	Escalivada amb anxoves (Catalan)
<i>Translation</i>	Escalivada with anxovies
<i>Original</i>	Gaspaxo (Catalan)
<i>Translation</i>	Gaspaxo

All these menu items could be translated by combinations of two or more procedures. In these cases, a translation using a loan word plus explanation (cf. Baker, 1992: 34) could provide a valid solution:

<i>Original</i>	Gambas al ajillo (Spanish)
<i>Translation</i>	Prawns sizzled with garlic and parsley
<i>Original</i>	Escalivada amb anxoves (Catalan)
<i>Translation</i>	'Escalivada' (ember-roasted sweet pepper, onion, tomato and aubergine salad) with anchovies.
<i>Original</i>	Gaspatxo (Catalan)
<i>Translation</i>	'Gaspatxo' (cold vegetable soup)

There were cases in which the translator did not know how to render certain word or groups of words and simply omitted them:

<i>Original</i>	Espatlla de xai al forn (Catalan)
<i>Translation</i>	Shoulder of lamb
<i>Original</i>	Cargols a la cassola (Catalan)
<i>Translation</i>	Snails
<i>Original</i>	Llom de porc a la brasa (Catalan)
<i>Translation</i>	Pork loin

These could be translated as follow:

<i>Original</i>	Espatlla de xai al forn (Catalan)
<i>Translation</i>	Baked shoulder of lamb
<i>Original</i>	Cargols a la cassola (Catalan)
<i>Translation</i>	Snails casserole
<i>Original</i>	Llom de porc a la brasa (Catalan)
<i>Translation</i>	Charcoal-broiled/cooked pork loin

All the above examples have been taken from the menus translated in the 1990s, and the alternative translations we have proposed have been taken from *Vocabulari de restaurants* and *Vocabulari de bars i restaurants*. However, there are other ways in which the above menu items might be translated. This is how some of the same items are rendered in the menus of the 1970s/80s:

<i>Original</i>	Gambas al ajillo
<i>Translation</i>	Shrimps in garlic sauce
<i>Original</i>	Escalivada amb anxoves
<i>Translation</i>	'Escalivada' (grilled vegetables) with anxovies
<i>Original</i>	Gaspatxo
<i>Translation</i>	'Gaspatxo' (cold soup made with bread, garlic, onion, olive oil, vinegar, water, and salt)

Functionality of menus

We did not expect to find such great differences between the menus of the 1970s/80s and those of the 1990s. However, the ratings given by the two informants show that the differences are at least intersubjective and suggest that the menus of the 1970s/80s do indeed fulfil their communicative purpose better than those of the 1990s. As the t-tests show, the function of the 1990s menus is affected by more linguistic and cultural translation errors than the menus of the 1970s/80s, and the differences between them are very significant:

T-TEST (language)		T-TEST (culture)	
1990s menus	1970/80s menus	1990s menus	1970s/80s menus
2	3.5	2	2.5
0	4.5	0	4
3.5	4.5	2.5	3.5
1	4.5	1.5	3.5
3	3	2	2.5
3	4.5	1.5	3.5
1.5	4.5	2	3.5
0.0030958		0.00106373	

It may be assumed that if translators have received some training, the problems that arise in the translation process can be more easily solved and the production of a functionally adequate target text can be better achieved. Our findings seem to corroborate this assumption because the translations done in the 1970s/80s were all done by professional translators and those done in the 1990s, by non- professional ones.

The data obtained suggest that nowadays restaurant owners do not look for professional translators. This hypothesis could be explained by the fact that English is now a more international language than it was 20 years ago; the number of university translation programmes in Spain, for instance, has increased very significantly from four, in the 1970s/80s, to 17, in the 1990s (Caminade and Pym, 1995). Nearly everybody has access to education and universities are crowded with many hundreds of students. This situation may lead restaurant owners to think that anybody with a few notions of English can translate a menu. It also seems to suggest that many people wrongly assume that a person with certain familiarity with the English language also has translational competence.

The situation in the 1970s and 1980s was quite different. Not so many people knew English, which was by no means as dominant as it is today. Further, education and the chance to get a university degree were more limi-

ted. If restaurant owners wanted to have their menus translated they had to go and look for professional translators.

To check whether the books by the Generalitat can be used to produce functional and adequate menu translations, the seven menus from the 1990s were translated again using these books and were rated by the same informants following the methods that had been used previously. The ratings of the 1990s menus improved considerably, suggesting that the Generalitat's books are helpful tools for the translation of menus from Catalan or Spanish into English. This improvement is clearly seen in the following t-tests:

T-TEST (language)		T-TEST (culture)	
Original 1990 menus	Corrected 1990 menus	Original 1990 menus	Corrected 1990 menus
2	3	2	3
0	3	0	3.5
3.5	4	2.5	3.5
1	3.5	1.5	3.5
3	3.5	2	3
3	3.5	1.5	3.5
1.5	3	2	3
0.03892783		0.00116404	

Conclusions

This study shows that the poor quality of the translations done in the 1990s can be improved by the use of the Generalitat's books. Nevertheless, given the lack of success the 1991 campaign seems to have had, some reassessment is needed before any future action is taken. In addition, it would also be useful if the Genralitat carried out follow-up studies of its campaigns to check the economic and social consequences of their investment.

It would also seem advisable that moves be made towards a general qualification system for translators in Spain, perhaps independently of the university translation programmes. That would allow more immediate and dependable social recognition of translational competence.

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