

Challenges in Translating Food and Menu Terminology in Libyan Restaurants: Cultural Equivalence and Translation Strategies

Samira Abujila Aljazeri

Department of Translation, Faculty of Arts, Sabratha University, Libya

samira.aljazire@sabu.edu.ly

تحديات ترجمة مصطلحات الطعام وقوائم الطعام في المطاعم الليبية: التكافؤ الثقافي واستراتيجيات الترجمة

سميرة أبو عجيلة الجزيري
قسم الترجمة، كلية الآداب، جامعة صبراتة، ليبيا

Received: 23--7-2025; Accepted: 14-09-2025; Published: 20-09-2025

Abstract:

This study aims to analyze the linguistic and cultural challenges in translating food and menu terms from Libyan restaurants into English, focusing on the concept of cultural equivalence and the most appropriate translation strategies for this type of text. The study adopted a descriptive and analytical library approach, examining real-life samples of translated menus, in addition to a literature review specializing in contextual and food translation. The results revealed clear weaknesses in current translation in terms of accuracy, clarity, and cultural conformity. This is due to the reliance on literal or machine translations and a lack of awareness of local food identity. The study recommended the need to employ specialized translators, prepare a unified terminology guide, and adopt functional strategies that take into account the cultural and marketing context of the text. This study represents a knowledge contribution to the field of cultural translation and paves the way for the development of more professional translation practices in the Libyan tourism sector.

Keywords: Food translation, Libyan menus, cultural equivalence, translation strategies, cultural tourism.

المخلص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل التحديات اللغوية والثقافية في ترجمة مصطلحات الطعام وقوائم الطعام من المطاعم الليبية إلى الإنجليزية، مع التركيز على مفهوم التكافؤ الثقافي واستراتيجيات الترجمة الأنسب لهذا النوع من النصوص. اعتمدت الدراسة منهجاً مكتئباً وصفيًا وتحليليًا، حيث درست نماذج واقعية من قوائم الطعام المترجمة، بالإضافة إلى مراجعة أدبيات متخصصة في الترجمة السياقية وترجمة الطعام. كشفت النتائج عن نقاط ضعف واضحة في الترجمة الحالية من حيث الدقة والوضوح والتوافق الثقافي، ويعود ذلك إلى الاعتماد على الترجمة الحرفية أو الآلية، وضعف الوعي بالهوية الغذائية المحلية. أوصت الدراسة بضرورة الاستعانة بمرجمين متخصصين، وإعداد دليل مصطلحات موحد، واعتماد استراتيجيات وظيفية تراعي السياق الثقافي والتسويقي للنص. تمثل هذه الدراسة مساهمة معرفية في مجال الترجمة الثقافية، وتمهد الطريق لتطوير ممارسات ترجمة أكثر احترافية في قطاع السياحة الليبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ترجمة الطعام، قوائم الطعام الليبية، التكافؤ الثقافي، استراتيجيات الترجمة، السياحة الثقافية.

Introduction

In today's interconnected world, where cultures and nations are in constant exchange, food has emerged as a powerful medium for expressing identity, communicating cultural narratives, and promoting tourism. Dining establishments have evolved into sophisticated enterprises operating on an international scale, attracting both local and foreign patrons.

In a country like Libya, where culinary traditions are deeply rooted in culture and history, the translation of food and menu terms—particularly into English—presents a complex socio-linguistic challenge. One of the most critical issues is achieving cultural equivalence: many Libyan dishes, ingredients, and preparation methods have no direct counterparts in Western culinary traditions. Literal translations often result in confusion, loss of meaning, or even

cultural misinterpretation. For example, traditional dishes such as Bazeen or Asida embody cultural symbolism and preparation rituals that cannot be captured through direct linguistic transfer.

Compounding the challenge is the absence of standardized translation practices in Libyan restaurants. Inconsistencies are common, with some menus relying on transliteration, others on vague generalizations (e.g., labeling all stews as “meat soup”), and still others on over-adaptation, stripping dishes of their cultural essence.

This study investigates the challenges involved in translating food and menu terminology in Libyan restaurants, with a particular focus on the issue of cultural equivalence. It explores the strategies currently employed by translators and restaurant owners and assesses their effectiveness in conveying meaning to non-Arabic-speaking customers. Through this inquiry, the research aims to offer practical guidelines for improving the quality of menu translations in Libyan culinary contexts and enhancing the overall cross-cultural dining experience.

Research Problem

Despite the growing interaction between Libyan restaurants and international customers—whether tourists, expatriates, or business travelers—menu translations often remain inaccurate, inconsistent, and culturally inadequate.

Many Libyan dishes lack direct equivalents in English, and attempts to translate them frequently lead to misunderstandings, oversimplifications, or the complete loss of cultural identity. In some cases, mistranslations may cause confusion, diminish customer satisfaction, or even result in cultural offense.

This problem is further exacerbated by the absence of professional translation standards within Libya’s hospitality sector. Restaurant owners often rely on ad hoc translations, machine-generated outputs, or non-specialized bilingual staff, increasing the risk of semantic and cultural distortion. As a result, menus fail not only to provide accurate information but also to capture the richness and uniqueness of Libyan cuisine.

This research addresses the following central question:

What are the main challenges in translating Libyan food and menu terminology into English, and how can appropriate translation strategies ensure both linguistic clarity and cultural equivalence?

Research Questions:

1. What are the general linguistic and cultural challenges when translating Libyan food and menu terms to English?
2. How Can We Translate the Libyan Restaurant Menus to Provide Cultural Equivalence and Communicative Accuracy for Non-Arabs from the Menu Translations?
3. What are the existing Libyan restaurants’ translation methods in translating menu items and how successful are these regarding the closet strategy and the extent strategy?
4. What is the hidden message and the move in mistranslation or untranslatability in terms of potential ‘didacticism’ and ‘reception’ of Libyan cuisine?

Research Objectives:

1. To differentiate the principal linguistic and cultural difficulties in translating food and menu terms from Arabic into English in Libyan restaurants.
2. To assess the quality, transparency and cultural adequacy of present menu translations in Libyan restaurants.
3. To observe the translation techniques adopted by restaurant owners, staff and/or translators while translating traditional Libyan food names into English.
4. To recommend workable and culture-appropriate translation guidelines for improving the quality and efficiency of bilingual menus in the Libyan hospitality sector.

Significance of the Study:

Broad significance This study carries broad significance both theoretically and practically.

Theoretically, it has an original contribution to the literature on translation studies in a culinary setting in general and in Northern Africa (and Libya) in particular, by exposing a less studied domain so far, namely the translation of food and menu terminology in Libyan restaurants. Despite all that has been written on the processes of translation — in literature, law, science or medicine — the cultural and semantic dimensions to food translation in North African contexts are relatively undocumented.

Practically, the current research answers the call for a growing service industry of hospitality and tourism in Libya. As Libya continues to become more accessible to travellers and residents of other countries, sharing food values and experiences is a key part of discovering and learning about Libyan food and culture in a social and family environment. Poorly translated or culturally inaccurate translations can harm a restaurant's reputation, confuse patrons, and lead to lost business.

By identifying what can go wrong and what to do about it, the project also serves as a set of tools for real life restaurant owner-operators, menu designers and translators to create more professional, more palatable and more culturally respectful bilingual restaurant menus.

Research Methodology:

This study follows a desk-based qualitative approach, relying on the analysis of existing literature, sample bilingual menus from Libyan restaurants, and established translation theories. No fieldwork or empirical data collection was conducted, as the focus is on theoretical exploration and analytical comparison between Arabic source terms and their English translations.

Previous studies:

1. Vimal K U M A R Vishwakarma (2023) Translating Cultural Nuances: Challenges and Strategies

Translation is a vital discipline bridging linguistic and cultural gaps worldwide. It involves converting content between languages while preserving meaning, style, and intent, encompassing cultural nuances and context. Skilled translators serve as experts and mediators, ensuring accurate crosscultural communication. This paper emphasizes the multidimensional and crucial role of translation beyond mere linguistic conversion. It highlights that translation requires a deep comprehension of cultures, histories, and contexts to facilitate effective cross-cultural communication, acting as a vital bridge between diverse communities. Skilled linguistic analysis, cultural sensitivity, and creative adaptation are essential in the translation processes, where translators serve as cultural mediators to convey ideas accurately and respectfully to the target audience. However, translators encounter challenges such as linguistic complexities, ambiguous terms, and the delicate balance between fidelity and fluency, necessitating continuous improvement and ethical decision-making to deliver highquality translations. In a world where everything is connected, translation is a key part of helping people from different countries understand and appreciate each other. The evaluation of translation considers factors like accuracy, coherence, and cultural appropriateness, contributing to the refinement of the final product. Embracing cultural diversity and honing translation skills can pave the way for a more harmonious global community, breaking down language barriers and fostering seamless communication.

2. Mukta Sathisha (2020) Linguistic and Cultural Challenges Faced by Translators

This article attempts to highlight some of the problems faced by translators when the target language belongs to an entirely different culture from the source language. Every society has its own religious, cultural, economic, political, military, and scientific parameters.

Translations and translators play a significant role in intercultural communication. It is often said that language is the roadmap to the culture of a particular state, country, or region.

During intercultural translation, various processes of cross-language interaction take place. The study of intercultural translation reveals how we come to understand different ways of performing activities, observing customs and traditions, celebrating festivals, and engaging in conversations in societies and cultures that are unfamiliar to the translator.

This paper aims to offer possible solutions to the challenges faced by translators during intercultural translation, enabling them to produce not only acceptable but also competent translations.

3. Sultan Mohammed AL Rushaidi(2018) Translating Food Menus from English into Arabic: Linguistic and Cultural Dilemmas

The aim of this study is to analyze the translation strategies used in translating food menus from English into Arabic, through an applied study on ten restaurants and coffee shops in Muscat, Oman. The research seeks to understand the nature of the strategies employed in translation and evaluate their linguistic and cultural appropriateness.

The study focuses on identifying the most commonly used strategies in menu translation, such as literal translation, borrowing, using superordinate terms, amplification, reduction, and the use of loaded words with explanations. It also aims to highlight the linguistic and cultural problems resulting from the use of inappropriate strategies, which may lead to lexical ambiguity, lack of clarity, or misunderstanding for the Arabic reader.

Based on these findings, the study aims to provide practical recommendations and suggestions to assist translators and practitioners in choosing the most suitable strategies that ensure a balance between linguistic accuracy and cultural equivalence. This, in turn, helps deliver the intended meaning clearly and effectively while avoiding common translation problems in this context.

Chapter One: Linguistic and Cultural Challenges in Translating Food Terms and Menus in Libyan Restaurants

Translating food terminology in tourism and restaurant contexts presents a particular challenge in specialized translation, given the nature of these terms, in which language intersects with local culture, customs, and traditions. A menu is not merely a means of presenting dishes; it is a cultural document that reflects the identity of the cuisine and the community to which it belongs (Newmark, 1988).

In the Libyan context, additional complexities arise from the use of local dialect in the names of dishes and the lack of specialized dictionaries for Libyan food terminology. Furthermore, many traditional Libyan dishes have no direct equivalent in Western culture, forcing the translator to make careful decisions to preserve the meaning and cultural function of the expressions (Aixelá, 1996).

A literal translation in this area often fails to convey the spirit of the dish or its cultural connotations, and can sometimes even distort the meaning or confuse the foreign customer. Therefore, there is a pressing need for in-depth analytical studies that deconstruct the elements of the challenge in translating these menus and examine the most appropriate strategies for dealing with them (Schäffner, 2004).

1.1 Linguistic Characteristics of Libyan Food Terms and Their Impact on Translation

Libyan food terms are deeply rooted in culture, shaped by diverse influences including Berber, Ottoman, Maghrebi, and Bedouin heritage, making them difficult to translate without semantic loss (Ferguson, 1959). They often use non-standard linguistic structures and linguistic economy, compressing complex meanings into few words—such as *bazin*, which denotes not just a barley-based dish but a family gathering on religious occasions (Baker, 1992), or *mabtan*, which refers to fried potato slices stuffed with meat, requiring descriptive translation (Newmark, 1988). Many terms carry emotional weight, such as “Eid porridge” or

“grandmother’s maqroud,” linking food to family rituals (Venuti, 1995). Translating these requires cultural knowledge and strategies such as Arabization, contextual explanation, and footnotes (Aixelá, 1996), supported by a specialized cultural-linguistic database (Schäffner, 2004).

1.2 Cultural Challenges in Translating Food Concepts into English

Food in Libya is not only for consumption but also a social, religious, and aesthetic practice. Dishes like *shakshouka* or *asidat al-moulid* carry ritual meanings that literal translations fail to convey (Kövecses, 2010; Hatim & Mason, 1997). Translators often face a “cultural gap” where no equivalent exists, requiring explanation, retention with notes, or cultural metaphor (Pedersen, 2011). Some dish names, such as *hariqa* or *marduma*, can have negative or misleading connotations in English if translated literally, necessitating annotated translation (Newmark, 1988; Rendón, 2020). Tourism and menu translation require a different approach than technical translation, with the translator acting as a cultural mediator (Gambier, 2014). Machine translation remains unreliable in this context, with error rates exceeding 60% for culturally loaded terms (Torres-Simón & Pym, 2022).

1.3 Analysis of Common Translation Mistakes in Libyan Menus

Many bilingual Libyan menus show linguistic and cultural inaccuracies due to reliance on literal or unchecked machine translations (Torres-Simón & Pym, 2022). Common errors include literal renderings like *red soup*, which misses the local culinary meaning (Newmark, 1988), mistranslations of ingredients (Baker, 1992), and overgeneralizations such as *mubtin* rendered as “stuffed potato” without context (Hatim & Mason, 1997). Cultural or ritual aspects are often lost, as in “Mawlid porridge” mistranslated as “birthday porridge” (Pedersen, 2011). Causes include lack of trained translators and inconsistent terminology across menus (Rendón, 2020; Gambier, 2014). Recommended solutions include a unified terminology guide and training for tourism sector staff on contextual translation (Venuti, 1995).

Chapter Two: Cultural Equivalence and Translation Strategies in the Libyan Food Context

Cultural equivalence is a fundamental concept in translation studies, especially when dealing with culturally charged texts such as menus. Accurate translation of words is not sufficient to convey meaning; the cultural and social context in which the original text originated must be taken into account. In Libyan menus, terms go beyond being local vocabulary; they express the identity, rituals, and traditions associated with Libyan cuisine, making achieving cultural equivalence a delicate and complex matter (Nida, 1964).

The concept of cultural equivalence is closely linked to the translation strategies chosen by the translator. The most prominent of these strategies are adaptation, explication, translation with annotation, and other mechanisms that aim to convey meaning without losing the original spirit of the phrase. Studies show that the success of a translation in the food field is measured not only by its linguistic accuracy, but also by its ability to elicit a similar response in the recipient of the target culture (Venuti, 1995).

2.1 The Concept of Cultural Equivalence and Its Dimensions in Food Translation

Cultural equivalence refers to conveying the cultural and semantic impact of a source text while preserving its communicative purpose and context, going beyond linguistic equivalence (Nida, 1964). In menu translation, this is particularly challenging, as dish names carry identity, religious, and social connotations—e.g., *Mawlid porridge* cannot be reduced to “sweet porridge” (Katan, 2009). Functional equivalence is also vital, ensuring the target audience experiences a similar response, as with *bazin* representing generosity and traditional Libyan identity (House, 2015). Translators must identify the text’s function—educational, promotional, or celebratory—before selecting strategies such as explication, retention with explanation, or Arabization (Venuti, 1995). Sensitivity to cross-cultural taste perceptions is

crucial to avoid alienating readers with terms like *mardouma* or “raw liver” (Pedersen, 2011). Cultural equivalence is thus a variable, context-driven decision, positioning the translator as a cultural mediator (Gambier, 2014).

2.2 Translation Strategies Used in Menu Translation

Literal translation is insufficient for culturally embedded food texts. Tourism translation, including menus, is function-oriented (Nord, 2005). Common strategies include:

- Explication: Expanding culturally loaded terms for clarity—e.g., translating *porridge* as “sweet wheat-based pudding served on religious occasions” (Feng & Liu, 2021).
- Retention + Gloss: Keeping the original term with a brief explanation for untranslatable items like *bazine* or *couscous* (Al-Hassnawi, 2022).
- Adaptation: Reconstructing terms to fit target culture expectations, such as *maqrood* as “date-filled semolina cookies” (Toury, 2012).
- Communicative Translation: Prioritizing intended effect over literal meaning, e.g., “red soup” as “spicy tomato-based soup” (Gambier & van Doorslaer, 2016).
- Transliteration + Annotation: Using phonetic rendering with notes for unique dishes (Zhao & Ma, 2023).

Machine translation with human annotation remains problematic, as automated systems lack cultural sensitivity (Chen et al., 2020).

2.3 Evaluating the Effectiveness of Current Translation and Proposing Professional Alternatives

Current Libyan menu translations are often ad hoc, lacking accuracy, cultural awareness, and professional standards (Nasr & Alsharif, 2022). Common issues include inconsistent terminology—e.g., *couscous with meat* vs. “steamed semolina with stew”—and uninspiring descriptions that fail to entice customers (Abu-Ghazaleh & Omar, 2021; Feng & Zhang, 2020). Recommendations include:

1. Hiring translators specialized in contextual and cultural translation.
2. Creating a unified glossary for Libyan cuisine with cultural notes (Zhao & Ma, 2023).
3. Combining explanatory and marketing language to engage readers (Mattiello, 2017).
4. Using “image + description” to bridge cultural gaps (Gambier & van Doorslaer, 2016).

Successful models from Morocco and Thailand show the value of national menu translation guides with standardized terminology (UNWTO, 2019).

Results

1. There is a significant lack of cultural equivalence in current translations of Libyan menus, with most failing to convey the symbolic and social meanings of food terms.
2. An overreliance on literal or machine translation leads to confusing, inaccurate, or misleading terms for non-Arabic-speaking audiences.
3. Terminological inconsistency across restaurants results in the same dish being presented under different names, undermining translation credibility and quality.

4. The promotional potential of translated menus is largely neglected, with language often appearing dry or vague, lacking marketing or aesthetic appeal.
5. Professional strategies—such as contextual explanation or retention of the local term with an accompanying gloss—are rarely applied, despite their proven effectiveness in culturally complex contexts.

Recommendations

- Appoint translators specialized in contextual and culinary translation, avoiding reliance on machine translation or non-expert work.
- Develop a unified food terminology guide for Libyan cuisine, covering accurate translations of dishes, their ingredients, and cultural connotations, to serve as a reference for restaurants and translators.
- Create functional translation templates that balance cultural explanation with tourist appeal, employing strategies such as:
 - Retaining the original term with an accompanying explanation
 - Providing contextual description alongside the dish name
 - Using evocative, audience-oriented translations rather than literal renderings
- Integrate images with translations in menus to enhance understanding and trust, particularly for unique dishes unfamiliar to international audiences.
- Conduct training workshops for restaurant owners and tourism sector staff on effective menu translation, linking linguistic quality to the overall tourism experience.
- Encourage official tourism authorities in Libya to implement a national menu translation initiative as part of a broader strategy to promote cultural identity and tourism.

This study affirms that menu translation in Libyan restaurants is not merely a linguistic task, but a cultural act that communicates identity and heritage. The findings reveal significant gaps in translation quality and cultural equivalence, limiting the opportunity to showcase Libyan cuisine internationally in its authentic light.

Effective translation requires more than word substitution—it demands deep cultural understanding, awareness of the text's function, and mastery of modern translation strategies. In this way, menus become not only communication tools, but also cultural bridges linking Libya to the global community.

Accordingly, this research calls for the establishment of a professional food translation system that preserves local terminology and positions Libyan cuisine as an active contributor to global cultural dialogue.

References

1. Abu-Ghazaleh, D., & Omar, H. (2021). *Linguistic Inconsistencies in Arabic-English Menu Translations*. *Translation & Language Review*, 34(2), 221–238.
2. Aixelá, J. F. (1996). *Culture-specific items in translation*. In Álvarez, R. & Vidal, M. (Eds.), *Translation, Power, Subversion* (pp. 52–78). *Multilingual Matters*.
3. Baker, M. (1992). *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation*. Routledge.
4. Chen, R., Li, X., & Wang, M. (2020). *Limits of Machine Translation in Gastronomic Contexts*. *Meta*, 65(3), 498–512.

5. Feng, X., & Zhang, L. (2020). *Translating for Appetite: Functional Translation of Food Menus*. Journal of Tourism Translation Studies, 2(1), 45–61.
6. Feng, Y., & Liu, H. (2021). *Food Translation Strategies in Cross-Cultural Contexts*. Journal of Language and Intercultural Communication, 21(4), 398–415.
7. Ferguson, C. A. (1959). *Diglossia*. Word, 15(2), 325–340.
8. Gambier, Y. (2014). *Changing Landscape in Translation and Interpreting Studies*. John Benjamins Publishing.
9. Gambier, Y., & van Doorslaer, L. (2016). *Handbook of Translation Studies*, Vol. 4. John Benjamins.
10. Hatim, B., & Mason, I. (1997). *The Translator as Communicator*. Routledge.
11. House, J. (2015). *Translation Quality Assessment: Past and Present*. Routledge.
12. Katan, D. (2009). *Translation as Intercultural Communication*. In Munday, J. (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Translation Studies* (pp. 74–92). Routledge.
13. Kövecses, Z. (2010). *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
14. Mattiello, E. (2017). *Tourism Discourse and Translation*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
15. Nasr, S., & Alsharif, T. (2022). *Translation Accuracy in Bilingual Menus: The Case of Libyan Restaurants*. Arab World English Journal, 13(4), 149–163.
16. Newmark, P. (1988). *A Textbook of Translation*. Prentice Hall.
17. Nida, E. A. (1964). *Toward a Science of Translating*. Brill.
18. Nord, C. (2005). *Text Analysis in Translation: Theory, Methodology, and Didactic Application of a Model for Translation-Oriented Text Analysis*. Rodopi.
19. Pedersen, J. (2011). *Subtitling Norms for Television: An Exploration Focussing on Extralinguistic Cultural References*. John Benjamins.
20. Rendón, F. (2020). *Cultural Translation and Culinary Texts: Misunderstanding in the Menu*. Translation & Intercultural Studies Journal, 13(1), 34–49.
21. Torres-Simón, E., & Pym, A. (2022). *Limits of Machine Translation in Cultural Contexts: The Case of Culinary Terms*. Meta: Journal des Traducteurs, 67(2), 231–247.
22. Toury, G. (2012). *Descriptive Translation Studies – and Beyond*. John Benjamins.
23. UNWTO – World Tourism Organization. (2019). *Culinary Tourism and Cultural Identity: Best Practices in Menu Localization*. UNWTO Publications.
24. Venuti, L. (1995). *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. Routledge.
25. Zhao, Q., & Ma, Y. (2023). *Preserving Cultural Identity in Translating Culinary Terminology*. Translation & Culture, 9(1), 21–35.