Marketing food through translation: an analysis of a hundred menus from Lazio

A restaurant menu is both a business card of sorts and a showcase for any food service establishment. As such it belongs to a complex genre of info-marketing communication and is as yet a form of food-related text that has received surprisingly little critical attention with regard to its semiotic and multimodal features. The verbal level of the menu – dish names in particular – has also so far been neglected by linguistic and pragmatic studies. In a previous study by Graziano and Mocini (2015) founded on Halliday’s functional grammar as well as Floch’s socio-semiotic framework, the peculiar morpho-syntactic and lexical structure of this form of brief text was analysed paying special attention to its twofold informative and persuasive function. The present study, conducted on the dish names of one hundred menus taken from the websites of as many restaurants operating in Lazio (Italy), confirms the presence of the previously identified promotional strategies on a wider scale, both from the quantitative and the qualitative point of view. A second point analysed is whether and to what extent the English versions of the same menus employ the same strategies. The translation analysis is conducted using a comparative linguistic approach applied to Language for Special Purposes, orientation strategies and translation procedures commonly identified in Translation Theories, and, in part, Error Analysis. It is to be concluded that, despite the emphasis traditionally placed on the culture-bound characteristics of food language, what establishes the pragmatics of this kind of text, therefore posing greater difficulties in translation, is the combination of syntactic order and sensory-metaphorical lexis.