Translating Food: How to Translate Culture Specific Features in Recipes

Introduction and Scope

Over the past years, food and cooking have gone from being associated mostly with a profession to becoming more about entertainment, cooking personalities and do-it-yourself. Well-known names in the business such as Nigella Lawson, Jamie Oliver and Gordon Ramsay, and shows such as River Cottage, Top Chef and Jamie’s 30-Minute Meals have spread knowledge and inspiration all over the world. It is safe to say that cooking has become much more than just about food, it is about identification, culture and even politics. As a consequence of the increasing interest in different food cultures and personalities, television shows and cookbooks are exported to other countries, and today, both Martha Stewart and Jamie Oliver’s shows are frequently aired on Swedish television. With this extended import, translations of the *minilect* that is cooking terminology, is necessary. The main concern in this essay is to examine how culture specific features in cookbooks, such as measurements, ingredients and etymology of names of dishes, are handled when they are translated into a language were different measurements and ingredients are the norm.

Method and Material

The corpus used in this study is the Swedish classic baking cookbook *Sju sorters kakor*, with all recipes and texts translated from the original language Swedish into English. *Sju sorters kakor* (Eng. approx
‘Seven kinds of cookies’) was first published in 1945 and is today the best selling baking cookbook in Sweden. In 2005, the 90th edition was published, which is the one I have used as the Swedish corpus. The English translation was published in 2010.

I have used a few recipes from the original text which contain some of the translation challenges mentioned in on Paradowski’s and Epstein’s articles on translation and cooking. Those are provided in the Background section of this essay. In the Presentation section, I will present the strategies used to solve these problems in the English version of Sju sorters kakor.

**Background**

According to Michał B. Paradowski, an educator at the Institute of Applied Linguistics at the University of Warsaw, translating specialised and technical texts requires two kinds of knowledge: “First, familiarity with the *minilect* – restricted form of practically-oriented technolects used by a limited circle of specialists and/or linked to a limited field (Nordman 1996:556), [...] The second type of requisite knowledge is what could be called ‘encyclopaedic’ knowledge and experience.” (Paradowski 2010) He further exemplifies some of the challenges posed in translating cooking terminology, one being the numerous false friends appearing in what he refers to as the ‘culinary lingo’. For instance, ‘minced meat’ rarely contains any animal products at all, but instead often consists of finely chopped raisins or other dried fruits as filling in pies and pastries.

A different challenge is the occurrence of *semantic splits*, and in this example he makes the comparison between his mother-tongue, Polish, and English. Whereas a homonym in Polish has two different equivalents in English, it is necessary to be careful of which to use on which occasion, for instance *truffle* which could mean ‘truffle’ or ‘praline’ depending on the context where it is used. But the confusion is not only limited to ingredients, but also concerns to what degree something belongs to a category. Paradowski uses citrus fruits to exemplify the difficulties caused by the various uses and parts of these fruits:

> Depending on whether or not you remove the albedo, you end up with either ‘orange segments’ or ‘orange sections’. Likewise, ‘lemon rind’ is what you typically discard after peeling the fruit, but ‘lemon zest’ is the colourful outer part of the skin which you may want to grate beforehand to use in a lemon meringue pie or ossobuco alla milanese.

(Paradowski 2010)
As shown in the examples above, there are several issues to be aware of when translating cooking terminology. In another article on translating food, called *What’s Cooking: Translating Food* (2009), Brett Jocelyn Epstein identifies four main issues when translating culinary lingo; *availability, cuts of meat, measurements and implements, pots and pans.*

**Availability**

The availability issue refers to the cases where access to ingredients listed in the original recipe is limited or more expensive in the target language culture, and therefore cannot be used to the same extent as is stated in the recipe. She further explains that this problem cannot be solved by simply exchanging lobster for shrimp without further explanation, and that if suggestions or changes are made to the original recipe, it should be clearly stated in the translation what has been changed and why. Ideally, if ingredients are switched, both the original version and the altered one should be tested by the translator or someone related to the project, to make sure the taste, smell, measurements and other features are preserved.

**Cuts of Meat**

The *cuts of meat* problem derives from the fact that different countries have different definitions of cuts of meat, i.e. from which part of the animal’s body the meat is taken and what it is called. Even if finding a sufficient translation for the terminology is relatively easy, it might not always refer to the same body part of the animal in both languages. Epstein’s solution to this problem is to either find a country specific chart over the cuts of meat, or to ask a professional for help.

**Measurements**

The problem that different measurement systems provide is probably the most systematic, since its fixed nature makes it possible to convert a measure into another system with the help of a conversion table. Epstein provides two possible solutions to how to adapt the different measurement to the target language. The first one is to keep the original measurements and in the back of the book provide a conversion table. This will provide a more accurate recipe, but might be quite irritating if the cookbook is frequently used for cooking. Nevertheless, Epstein points out that if the
cookbook is more of the coffee table type of book, used for looking at more than cooking from, this solution is fine.

The other solution is to change the measurements into the system used in the target language and this can be done in two different ways: complete replacement or replacement and retention. The former works in the way that if the recipe states 2 US cups, which corresponds to 4.73176473 dl, the translator, or someone else, tests the recipes and shifts the measurement to more even numbers, in this case probably 5 dl. It is important here that all the measurements are changed and that they work equally well as the original. Another strategy for replacement, the one called replacement and retention, is to provide the shifted measurements in the recipe, but to keep the original in parenthesis (Epstein 2009).

**Implements, Pots and Pans**

*Implements, pots and pans* refer to different cooking tools and kitchen utensils which might or might not be country specific. Sometimes similar tools have very different names and definitions, and sometimes an equivalent instrument in the target language might not exist. It is important to make sure if a tool exists and what it is called before rewriting the sentence, and also in this case it is a good idea to ask an expert when in doubt.

In addition to these issues, I have added another point to the list, which is *Culture Specific Names*. In this category, dishes and ingredients such as *Spotted Dick* and *Devil’s Food Cake* would create the challenge of whether they should be translated, and if yes, how.

With these problems and strategies as a background, I will examine the challenges posed and the solutions provided in the translation of *Sju sorters kakor*.

**Presentation**

**Availability**

There were not many recipes where ingredients specific to Sweden were used, most recipes contain all-purpose flour, butter, jams, nuts and berries which could be found in English terminology and
food-stores. The distinction standing out was the differences between dairy products in the two languages. In Sweden there are products such as filmjölk, grädffil and crème fraîche, whereas in English, the equivalents of filmjölk and grädffil are not as common, but instead they use yoghurt and sour cream. In the English translation, grädffil is rendered as cultivated buttermilk, and filmjölk as sour cream. Whereas the former is translated directly, the latter is adapted into a more commonly known product in English but which is not the same as the original. The Swedish term describes a product made from cultivated milk, while the English describes cultivated cream.

Cuts of Meat

Since a baking cookbook is used for this study, and not many cakes and cookies contain animal protein, the whole issue with cuts of meat is non-existent. However, there are issues related to this problem in baking, one of them being the definition and boundaries between the related categories cookie, cake and torte. In Swedish, the terms kex, kaka and tårta cause some confusion since they are overlapping in their usage, where in some cases a pastry called a kaka (‘cookie’) is more similar to what would be defined as a kex (‘cracker’). In my opinion, there are two strategies available to deal with this issue: The first one would be to translate the Swedish terms so that the English definition of what a cookie, cake or torte is, is met. Thus, if a pastry in England would be considered a cake, it is translated into cake even if the Swedish name would imply it is more of a cookie, cracker or a torte. The other strategy is to consistently transfer the Swedish term kaka into the most similar English term, to create consistency and avoid confusion over what kind of pastry the recipe describes.

A quick look at the headings in the index of both texts gives a good idea of the strategy used in Sju sorters kakor:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Swedish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mjuka kakor</td>
<td>Cakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Småkakor</td>
<td>Cookies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tårtor</td>
<td>Cakes and Tortes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Sju sorters kakor 2005: 7-9)</td>
<td>(Swedish Cakes and Cookies 2010: 7-9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here we can see that in the index, the different types of pastries are categorised with a more detailed explanation in Swedish, whereas the English equivalents are more general. Since the English term cookie corresponds to both kex and kaka in Swedish, the translation of both these terms in the English version is reduced to cookie when the pastry is not a mjuk kaka meaning a more cake-like pastry. In a similar way, the English term cake could refer to either kaka or tårta in Swedish. In this case, however, the translator has chosen to add the less common term torte into the terminology to make a distinction between certain cakes.
The strategy used here is not to consistently translate a term in Swedish into the same term in English, but instead there is a system where a tårta that consists of only one layer, it is translated into cake, and when it is divided into layers with filling between the layers, it is defined as torte. Concerning the distinction between kex and kaka in Swedish, in English all the small, cookie-like pastries are called cookie, despite the split semantics in Swedish.

**Measurements**

In the English version of the recipes, a variation of the replacement and retention strategy is used, where the original measurements are kept and the target language conversion is stated in parenthesis. This is not the case for decilitres and cups only, but also grams converted into tablespoons and degrees Celsius into Fahrenheit. Thus, the translation of the recipe for Almond Pucks (Swedish Mandelkubbar) looks as follows:

Oven temp: 225°C (425°F), convection 200°C (400°F),
100 g (7 tablespoons) stick margarine or butter, softened
1½ dl (⅔ cup) sugar
1 egg
2 dl (3/4 cup) dairy sour cream
2 teaspoons hornsalt (baking ammonia) or 4 teaspoons baking powder
5 ½ dl (2¼ cups) all-purpose flour
½ teaspoon almond extract
Garnish:
pearl sugar
chopped almonds (optional)

(Swedish Cakes and Cookies, 2010: 21)

**Implements, Pots and Pans**

Since Sju sorters kakor only deals with baking, and not cooking, there is a limited set of tools used in the recipes, which are quite similar in both languages. Nevertheless, there are two instances where a Swedish tool is used which is not as common in English, and there are two different strategies used to translate them.
The first one can be found on page 53 in both editions, where in the description on how to know when a soft cake is ready to take out of the oven, a metal needle is used. In Swedish, it is described as a *rostfri nål* (‘stainless needle’), which is also called *potatissticka* (‘potato-stick’) when it is used to see if the boiled potatoes are ready. In the English translation the word *skewer* is used, which is a similar instrument, a metal stick, but thicker and used to hold food together when barbequing.

In the other instance, which can be found on page 122 in both editions, a cheese planer is used to make thin slices of chocolate as decoration. Where in the Swedish description, the verb *hyvla* (‘slice’) is used, which corresponds to using the tool called *osthyvel* (‘cheese planer’), in English, where the tool is not as common, the description is re-written as “Using a cheese plane, make thin slices” (2010: 122).

**Culture Specific Names**

The distinctions between cookies, cakes and tortes could fit in under this heading also, but I have decided to dedicate this section to names, rather than descriptions. There are a few different strategies to be observed in the English version of the book, where the first one could be found on the cover. The Swedish title, *Sju sorters kakor*, is left un-translated on the English cover, and instead a subtitle is added, saying *Swedish Cakes and Cookies*. Since *Sju sorters kakor* is a Swedish expression going all the way back to the tea-parties and housewives in the 1900s, it would only cause confusion to try and translate the idiom into English – the book contains so many more than just seven recipes.

The second strategy used is to transform a cultural specific name into a more descriptive name, as is the case with *Snoddas*. Snoddas is a chocolate cake, made in a roasting pan, and covered in a chocolate and coffee frosting. In the English translation, however, the pastry is instead called *Choco-Coco Squares*.

A third strategy is found in the translation of the Swedish cream-filled bun associated with the Shrove Tuesday – the *Semla*. In this case, since the Semla is connected to a specific festival day, it can be used to form a new name, related to the second strategy. In this case, the Semla is translated into *Lenten Buns*, which has a related, but less commonly used, name in Sweden - *Fastlagsbulle*. 
Concluding Remarks

The strategies used in the translation of *Sju sorters kakor*, can be said to be more culture oriented than language oriented, where recipes are named to fit the expectations of the target language, and the descriptions of ingredients and tools are adapted to the conventions and common usage in the target culture. Whether the translator has actually baked and tried the converted recipes is not possible to tell from the English version, and I am very interested in knowing whether sour cream is equivalent to *filmjölk* when baking. Worth mentioning in this section is that the Swedish culture is quite similar to that in England and the US, and there would probably have been more difficulties if the translation had been between, for instance, Swedish and Japanese, where measurements, cooking instruments, holidays and ingredients are a lot more different.
References

Primary sources

Ica Provkök. 2005. Sju sorters kakor. Ica Bokförlag, Forma Publishing Group AB.


Secondary sources
