

Translating the Greek Gastronomic Cultural Element: Challenges and Strategies

Evanthia Saridaki* 

University of Thessaly, Greece

evasarid@hotmail.com

Published: 31/12/2025

*Corresponding author

Citation:

Saridaki, E. (2025).
Translating the Greek
Gastronomic Cultural
Element: Challenges and
Strategies. *Studies in
Linguistics and Language
Education*, 1(2), 10–18

ABSTRACT: *This paper explores the linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic challenges involved in translating Greek gastronomic cultural elements into English. Greek cuisine, shaped by millennia of historical and social influences, constitutes a complex semiotic system that resists transparent linguistic transfer. Through an interdisciplinary framework drawing on translation studies, cultural anthropology, and food studies, the paper analyses key issues such as cultural specificity, lexical gaps, untranslatability, and audience-oriented translation strategies. It discusses how genre, purpose, and communicative context influence translators' decisions, and evaluates strategies including borrowing, explicitation, substitution, and paratextual support. By providing case studies and offering practical recommendations, the paper underscores the translator's role as a cultural mediator and highlights the ethical considerations inherent in representing Greek gastronomic culture for global audiences.*

KEYWORDS: Cultural References, Gastronomy Translation, Greek Cuisine, Translation Difficulties, Translation Strategies

*Studies in Linguistics and
Language Education (SLLE)*

© 2025 The Author(s).

Published by the University of
Oran 2 Mohamed Ben
Ahmed, Algeria.

This is an open access article
under the [CC BY license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



Introduction

Greek gastronomy represents a multifaceted cultural system that extends far beyond food as mere sustenance; it encompasses history, identity, ritual, geography, and collective memory. As such, translating Greek gastronomic elements into another linguistic and cultural framework constitutes a demanding process that requires not only linguistic competence but also cultural awareness, anthropological sensitivity, and strategic decision-making. According to Katan (2014), food-related texts exist on the intersection of language and culture, rendering translation a task of mediating cultural meaning rather than simply transferring lexical information. When Greek cuisine is mobilized in texts ranging from cookbooks and menus to tourism materials, literary narratives, and audiovisual products, translators face the challenge of conveying both the denotative and connotative layers of meaning embedded in culturally specific dishes, ingredients, idioms, and practices.

This paper examines the major challenges and possible strategies in translating Greek gastronomic cultural elements into English. Drawing from translation studies, cultural studies, and food anthropology, it discusses the importance of cultural specificity, issues of equivalence, untranslatability, and the impact of genre and audience. Finally, it provides an analysis of translation strategies, including domestication, foreignization, explicitation, substitution, and the use of paratext, while emphasizing the translator's role as a cultural mediator.

Translating Greek gastronomic terms into English presents considerable challenges due to cultural specificity, lexical gaps, and differing culinary traditions. The present analysis explores these challenges through detailed case studies of emblematic Greek gastronomic terms, including *mezedes*, *pita*, *mageiritsa*, *ladera*, *paximadi*, *koulouri Thessalonikis*, *tsipouro*, and *gliko tou koutaliou*. Drawing on translation theory, cultural studies, and food anthropology, the study analyzes how each term functions within Greek culture and outlines the implications for translation. Through intertextual references to Nida (1964), Venuti (1995), Newmark (1988), Katan (2014), and others, the paper demonstrates that gastronomic translation requires more than linguistic equivalence; it necessitates cultural mediation. Each case study evaluates strategies such as borrowing, explicitation, substitution, and paratextual support, arguing for context-sensitive solutions that preserve cultural authenticity while ensuring accessibility for English-speaking audiences.

1. Greek Gastronomy as a Cultural System

Greek culinary practices reflect millennia of cultural layering, shaped by ancient Greek, Byzantine, Ottoman, and Mediterranean influences. As Montanari (2006) argues, cuisine functions as an essential cultural code through which communities express collective identity. In Greece, dishes such as *moussaka*, *dolmades*, and *tzatziki* encapsulate regional agricultural traditions, seasonal cycles, social rituals, and symbolic values.

Food in Greek culture is not isolated from other cultural dimensions. The ritual of sharing a meal (*trapezi*) is intertwined with hospitality (*philoxenia*), a concept central to Greek social life (Hirschon, 1992). Religious traditions, including Orthodox fasting periods, also shape gastronomic practices and terminology. As a result, Greek gastronomic elements are culturally saturated signs that challenge simple translation.

2. The Complexity of Translating Gastronomic Elements

2.1 Linguistic and Cultural Specificity

Many gastronomic terms are culture-bound, meaning they refer to objects, practices, or concepts unique to a particular cultural context. Newmark (1988) classifies food items among the most frequent cultural words, which often resist direct translation. Greek food vocabulary

includes indigenous ingredients (e.g., *horta*, *manouri*, *paximadi*), cooking methods (e.g., *ladera*, *psito sti gastra*), and culinary categories embedded in Greek cultural knowledge.

Moreover, the Greek language often encodes gastronomic meaning through idioms (e.g., *έφαγε χυλόπιτα*, literally “he ate a slap made of dough”), metaphors, and evaluative terms that carry sociocultural connotations. Translating such expressions involves negotiating not only semantic content but also cultural resonance.

2.2 The Problem of Equivalence

Equivalence between source and target language items is a central concern in translation theory. However, exact equivalence rarely exists for culture-specific gastronomic concepts. Nida’s (1964) distinction between formal and dynamic equivalence highlights the tension between preserving form and ensuring communicative effectiveness. In gastronomic translation, this tension becomes particularly pronounced: for example, rendering *koulouri Thessalonikis* as simply “sesame bagel” may achieve functional communication but erases cultural specificity.

2.3 Untranslatability and Cultural Loss

Some Greek gastronomic terms can be considered “untranslatable” in the sense Bakhtin (1981) suggests: their cultural meaning is deeply rooted in a specific worldview. While absolute untranslatability is debated, partial losses of cultural nuance are common. Venuti (1995) argues that translation inevitably produces displacement, as cultural elements are reshaped within the target language’s horizon. In the case of Greek gastronomy, literal translations often fail to capture sensory dimensions, historical references, or social meanings.

3. Genre and Audience Considerations

Gastronomic translation operates across diverse genres, each with its own conventions and expectations. The translator’s choices are influenced by context, purpose, and readership.

3.1 Cookbooks and Recipes

Cookbook translations prioritize clarity, functionality, and procedural coherence. The translator must decide how to render measurements, cooking techniques, and ingredients. For example, *voutiro gia to tiganisma* may require adaptation to English culinary norms, such as specifying “unsalted butter for frying.” As Zajac (2015) notes, cookbook translation involves balancing cultural retention with usability.

3.2 Menus and Tourism Materials

Menu translation aims at appealing to international visitors while representing local cuisine authentically. Misleading translations (e.g., “rooster in wine” instead of the more familiar “coq au vin”) may create confusion or diminish perceived culinary value. Tourism texts often exoticize gastronomy, and translators must navigate between appealing marketing language and factual accuracy (Dann, 1996).

3.3 Literary and Audiovisual Texts

In fiction and film, gastronomic references contribute to characterization, setting, and narrative symbolism. For example, in literature describing Greek family life, the presence of *spanakopita* may evoke themes of tradition and domesticity. Translators must preserve semiotic richness while avoiding excessive footnotes. Audiovisual translation further complicates matters due to multimodal constraints (Gambier, 2003).

4. Semantic and Pragmatic Challenges in Greek Gastronomic Translation

4.1 Lexical Gaps

Lexical gaps occur when the target language lacks a term for a specific concept. Many Greek food terms fall into this category. For instance, *mezedes* refers to small dishes served with drinks,

encapsulating a social practice rather than merely “appetizers.” Translating it as “tapas” risks false equivalence, as Spanish tapas carry different cultural connotations.

4.2 Polysemy and Cultural Associations

Gastronomic terms often carry multiple meanings. The Greek word *pita* can refer to flatbread, savory pies, or even “cake,” depending on context. Translators must infer intended meaning from genre, region, and context to avoid misinterpretation.

4.3 Pragmatic Considerations

Pragmatic factors, such as politeness norms, degrees of formality, and implied meanings, also affect translation. For example, references to traditional dishes in political speeches or advertising may evoke nostalgia (*nostos*) and authenticity, which are cultural values not easily transferred across languages.

5. Translation Strategies

5.1 Borrowing (Transliteration)

Borrowing involves transferring the Greek term into the target language using transliteration (e.g., *tzatziki*, *souvlaki*). This strategy maintains cultural authenticity but may require contextual clarification for unfamiliar audiences. As Venuti (1995) notes, borrowing contributes to foreignization, foregrounding cultural difference.

5.2 Literal Translation

Literal translation can succeed when the meaning is transparent (“tomato salad” for *ntomatosalata*) but often risks producing misleading or awkward renderings (“oil-cooked dishes” for *ladera*). Literal translation can be appropriate in didactic contexts but generally requires supplementation.

5.3 Explicitation

Explicitation involves adding descriptive information to clarify meaning. For example, *ladera* could be translated as “vegetable dishes cooked in olive oil.” While this enhances comprehension, it may interrupt textual flow or reduce readability. Aikio (2010) emphasizes that explicitation is useful for unfamiliar cultural items but should be applied judiciously.

5.4 Substitution

Substitution replaces a source-culture item with a target-culture equivalent. For example, replacing *glyko tou koutaliou* with “fruit preserve” makes the text accessible but erases ritual connotations associated with offering spoon sweets to guests. Substitution often aligns with domestication strategies.

5.5 Paratextual Strategies

Footnotes, glossaries, images, or translator’s notes can provide cultural context without overloading the main text. Genette (1997) highlights the power of paratexts in shaping reading experiences. In gastronomic translation, paratext can restore cultural nuance lost in the main text.

5.6 Mixed or Hybrid Strategies

Many translations employ combined strategies, such as borrowing with explicitation (e.g., “*paximadi* (traditional twice-baked barley rusk)”). Hybrid approaches allow translators to balance authenticity and accessibility.

6. Case Studies of Key Greek Gastronomic Terms

This part of the paper presents an in-depth analysis of key Greek gastronomic terms and the challenges associated with their translation. Focusing on case studies, it demonstrates the interplay between language and culture and highlights strategies for mediating meaning between Greek and English contexts.

Culture-specific terms, according to Newmark (1988), are embedded in cultural practices and therefore present obstacles to direct translation. Greek food terms fall into this category because they reflect unique historical, agricultural, and social conditions. For example, *mezedes* encapsulate not only food but also the Greek social experience of sharing small dishes over extended conversation.

Venuti's (1995) concept of foreignization and domestication is central to the translation of gastronomic terms. Translators must decide whether to preserve cultural distinctiveness through borrowing or make the text more accessible by substituting with familiar terms. Intertextual references—connections across texts and cultural discourses—play a key role in understanding and translating food terms. For instance, the cultural associations surrounding *mageiritsa* cannot be understood without reference to the Greek Orthodox Easter tradition. Similarly, *koulouri Thessalonikis* relates to regional identity and urban street culture, elements reflected across Greek literature, travel writing, and popular media. Nida (1964) distinguishes between formal equivalence (maintaining form) and dynamic equivalence (maintaining effect). Gastronomic translation often requires prioritizing dynamic equivalence, especially when literal forms offer little utility for target readers. However, excessive domestication risks erasing cultural meaning, a concern echoed by scholars such as Tymoczko (1999).

Case Study 1: *Mezedes*

Cultural Significance

Translating *mezedes* is challenging due to its socio-cultural significance. While often rendered as “appetizers,” the concept also includes communal eating and leisurely socializing. The translator must consider genre: a menu may use “appetizers,” while a cultural essay may retain *mezedes* with explanation.

The term *mezedes* refers to an assortment of small dishes served with alcoholic beverages, notably *ouzo* or *tsipouro*. Beyond food items, the concept signifies social gathering, leisurely conversation, and shared experience. The social dimension of *meze* culture reflects Greek values of hospitality (*philoxenia*) and communal bonding.

Translation Challenges

Rendering *mezedes* as “appetizers” misrepresents their cultural function, since appetizers serve as preliminary dishes, whereas *mezedes* may constitute the entire meal. Equating them with “tapas” introduces false cognates since the Spanish tapas tradition differs in historical origin and social function.

Suggested Strategies

- **Borrowing:** *mezedes* (most culturally faithful).
- **Borrowing + Explicitation:** *mezedes*, small shared dishes served with drinks.
- **Functional substitution:** limited use in tourism contexts.

Venuti (1995) would argue for foreignization to preserve cultural identity, whereas Newmark (1988) might support limited explanation for clarity.

Case Study 2: *Pita*

Polysemy of the Term

The multiple meanings of *pita* necessitate contextual interpretation. In culinary tourism materials, distinguishing between “Greek savory pie (*pita*)” and “flatbread (*pita*)” ensures clarity. Ambiguity should be avoided unless narratively relevant. The term *pita* is highly polysemous, referring to:

- flatbread (*pita psomi*)
- filled pies (*spanakopita*, *tyropita*)
- cake-like ceremonial foods (*vasilopita*)

This variation reflects the diversity of Greek culinary traditions.

Translation Challenges

Direct translation risks confusion. “Pie” may work in some contexts but fails for flatbreads. Similarly, “pita bread” is widely recognized internationally but may not convey Greek preparation methods.

Suggested Strategies

- **Contextual specification:** “Greek savory pie (pita)” versus “Greek flatbread (pita)”
- **Explicitation:** *vasilopita*, traditional New Year’s cake.

This aligns with Aikio (2010), who emphasizes context-dependent translation.

Case Study 3: *Mageiritsa*

Cultural Context

Mageiritsa is a traditional Easter soup consumed after the midnight Resurrection service. It includes lamb offal, herbs, and *avgolemono* (egg-lemon) sauce. As Herzfeld (1985) suggests, Greek ritual foods embody identity, ritual purification, and seasonal renewal.

Translation Challenges

No English equivalent exists. Translating it as “Easter soup” lacks specificity, while “lamb offal soup” may evoke negative connotations. Cultural associations with the Easter ritual must also be conveyed.

Suggested Strategies

- **Borrowing + Explanation:** *mageiritsa*, traditional Greek Easter soup made with lamb offal and herbs.
- **Paratext:** glossary entries in cookbooks or footnotes in literary texts.

Case Study 4: *Ladera*

Meaning and Cultural Context

Ladera refers to a category of dishes cooked in olive oil, typically vegetable-based. As Montanari (2006) notes, such dishes reflect Mediterranean agriculture and seasonality.

Translation Challenges

Literal translation as “oily dishes” misrepresents the culinary value. “Vegetables cooked in olive oil” is descriptive but lengthy.

Suggested Strategies

- **Explicitation:** vegetable dishes cooked slowly in olive oil.
- **Borrowing in specialist contexts.**

Case Study 5: *Paximadi*

Cultural Role

Paximadi is a twice-baked rusk traditionally made from barley or wheat. It appears in Cretan cuisine, monastic diets, and rural food traditions (Dalby, 2003).

Translation Challenges

“Rusk” captures the texture but not cultural background. English-speaking readers may associate rusks with baby food.

Suggested Strategies

- **Borrowing + Explicitation:** *paximadi* (traditional twice-baked barley rusk).
- **Functional substitution** only when cultural meaning is secondary.

Case Study 6: *Koulouri Thessalonikis*

Urban and Regional Identity

This sesame-coated bread ring is a symbol of Thessaloniki’s Street food culture and daily breakfast tradition.

Translation Challenges

“Sesame bagel” is misleading, as it differs from the American bagel in texture and preparation.

Suggested Strategies

- **Borrowing:** *koulouri Thessalonikis*.
- **Borrowing + Explicitation:** traditional sesame bread ring from Thessaloniki.

Case Study 7: *Tsipouro*

Cultural Significance

Tsipouro is a distilled spirit made from grape pomace. It is strongly associated with socializing, regional traditions (especially in the districts of Thessaly and Epirus), and pairing with *mezedes*.

Translation Challenges

Equating *tsipouro* with “grappa” risks false equivalence due to differences in production and taste.

Suggested Strategies

- **Borrowing:** *tsipouro*.
- **Explicitation:** Greek grape pomace spirit.

Case Study 8: *Glyko tou koutaliou*

Social Function

“Sweet of the spoon” refers to fruit preserves offered traditionally to guests. This ritual reflects hospitality and symbolic generosity (Hirschon, 1992).

Translation Challenges

Rendering it as “spoon sweet” may confuse readers unfamiliar with the tradition.

Suggested Strategies

- **Explicitation:** traditional fruit preserve served to guests.
- **Borrowing in cultural studies contexts.**

To summarise, across the case studies, several patterns emerge:

- Borrowing preserves cultural authenticity (Venuti, 1995).
- Explicitation supports reader comprehension (Aikio, 2010).
- Substitution is rarely adequate for culturally dense terms.
- Paratextual elements bridge cultural knowledge gaps (Genette, 1997).

The translator must balance foreignness and accessibility without distorting cultural meaning. This supports Tymoczko’s (1999) view that translators act as cultural mediators.

7. Cultural Mediation and Translator Agency

Translators of gastronomic texts act as cultural mediators, negotiating between source and target norms. Tymoczko (1999) emphasizes that translators participate in cultural representation, shaping how target audiences perceive the source culture. In the case of Greek gastronomy, translators must avoid exoticization while preserving cultural richness.

Ethical considerations arise in maintaining authenticity and avoiding distortion for commercial appeal. Tourism texts, for instance, may pressure translators to simplify or romanticize Greek cuisine, contributing to stereotype formation (Urry, 2002). Responsible translation requires critical awareness of power dynamics and cultural politics.

8. Recommendations for Best Practices

Based on the analysis above, the following guidelines are proposed:

1. **Prioritize cultural understanding:** Translators should possess or acquire knowledge of Greek culinary traditions.
2. **Adapt strategy to genre and audience:** A flexible, context-sensitive approach is essential.
3. **Use borrowing for key cultural terms:** This preserves authenticity while expanding target-language vocabulary.
4. **Combine strategies as needed:** Hybrid solutions often best balance clarity and cultural fidelity.

5. **Utilize paratext judiciously:** Footnotes or glossaries can enhance cultural understanding when appropriate.
6. **Avoid misleading substitutions:** Accuracy should be prioritized over convenience.
7. **Maintain ethical awareness:** Represent Greek culture responsibly without distortion or stereotyping.

Conclusions

Food represents one of the most powerful cultural markers and communicative systems. As Barthes (2012) states, cuisine represents a form of language, carrying symbolic meanings, social structures, and historical memory. Greek gastronomy is no exception; it encapsulates centuries of culinary evolution, regional practices, ritualized meals, and deeply embedded cultural values. Translating Greek gastronomic terms into English therefore requires an approach that transcends lexical matching and enters the realm of cultural semiotics. Translation studies scholars such as Nida (1964), Newmark (1988), and Venuti (1995) emphasize that culture-specific terms (CSTs), including food terminology, often resist direct equivalence due to differing cultural frames.

Translating Greek gastronomic cultural elements is a complex process that requires navigating linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic challenges. Greek cuisine embodies a rich cultural heritage, and its translation involves more than lexical transfer; it requires cultural mediation. By applying informed strategies—borrowing, explicitation, paratextual support, and context-sensitive decision-making—translators can preserve cultural depth while ensuring accessibility for English-speaking audiences.

Greek gastronomic terms frequently encapsulate social practices (*mezedes*), complex cultural events (*mageiritsa*), regional identity (*koulouri Thessalonikis*), or specific preparation methods (*ladera*), making them rich sites of study. They present complex translation challenges due to their entanglement with cultural practices, social rituals, historical memory, and regional identity. Through case studies of key terms, this paper demonstrates that food terminology cannot be translated solely at the lexical level. Effective translation requires a nuanced, context-sensitive approach incorporating borrowing, explicitation, and cultural awareness. As globalization increases the visibility of Greek cuisine, translators play a crucial role in shaping cross-cultural un

Thus, translating Greek gastronomic terms requires more than identifying lexical equivalents; it demands an understanding of the cultural, historical, and symbolic frameworks that give these terms meaning. The case studies presented in this paper—*mezedes*, *pita*, *mageiritsa*, *ladera*, *paximadi*, *koulouri Thessalonikis*, *tsipouro*, and *glyko tou koutaliou*—demonstrate that Greek food terminology is deeply embedded in social rituals, regional identities, and communal practices.

As food continues to serve as a key vehicle of cultural exchange in an increasingly globalized world, the role of translators in shaping cross-cultural understanding becomes ever more vital. Through thoughtful, ethically aware translation practices, the richness of Greek gastronomy can be shared with international audiences without sacrificing its cultural integrity.

References

- Aikio, M. (2010). *Cultural Translation in Practice*. Finn Lectura.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination*. University of Texas Press.
- Barthes, R. (2012). *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*. Routledge.
- Culinary Institute of America. (2011). *The Professional Chef*. Wiley.
- Dalby, A. (2023). *Food in the Ancient World from A to Z*. Routledge.
- Dann, G. (1996). *The Language of Tourism: A Sociolinguistic Perspective*. CAB International.
- Gambier, Y. (2003). Multimodality and Audiovisual Translation. *The Translator*, 9(2), 1–20.
- Genette, G. (1997). *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Herzfeld, M. (1985). *The poetics of manhood: contest and identity in a Cretan mountain village*. Princeton University Press.
- Hirschon, R. (1992). *Heirs of the Greek Catastrophe*. Clarendon Press.
- Katan, D. (2014). *Translating Cultures: An Introduction for Translators, Interpreters and Mediators*. Routledge.
- Montanari, M. (2006). *Food is Culture*. Columbia University Press.
- Newmark, P. (1988). *A Textbook of Translation*. Prentice Hall.
- Nida, E. (1964). *Toward a Science of Translating*. Brill.
- Tymoczko, M. (1999). *Translation in a Postcolonial Context*. St. Jerome.
- Urry, J. (2002). *The Tourist Gaze*. Sage.
- Venuti, L. (1995). *The Translator's Invisibility*. Routledge.
- Zajac, D. (2015). Culinary Translation and Cultural Negotiation. *Meta: Translators' Journal*, 60(3), 480–495.