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## **How do you say *kélén-kélén* in Italian? Migration, landscape and untranslatable food**

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### **Abstract**

This article discusses translation and migrant (in)visibility in Italy in the context of the so-called migrant and refugee crisis, using food as a key element in the redefinition of the asylum seekers' cultural identities. The article builds on the debate on linguistic performance and landscape in translation studies and sociolinguistics, relating the first results of a research project being carried out in Perugia (Italy) in collaboration with the NGO Tamat. If migrants are to gain agency and visibility, this can only happen in relation to the host landscape, the material and linguistic resources available in that landscape, and the possibilities for acting successfully as translators. Food is a key element of the discussion on migration and integration: by studying interactions in an agriculture class for asylum seekers, this article investigates how a discussion on food opens spaces for a productive exploration of difference that involves social, environmental and cultural elements.

**Keywords:** food, migration, translation, refugee crisis, eco-translation, globalization

## **Introduction**

Between January 2013 and July 2018, approximately 685,000 people reached Italy by sea (Villa, Emmi and Corradi 2018), a great majority of them applying for asylum. They crossed the Mediterranean fleeing conflict, hunger or persecution – a phenomenon that Europeans call the refugee crisis. Nigeria, Eritrea, Guinea-Conakry, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Senegal, and Mali are the most common countries of origin for those who have reached the Italian shores in the past few years (IDOS 2017). Framed as part of an “emergency” narrative, these individuals’ relevance in the public discourse transcends the extent of their actual presence in Italian cities and towns, catalyzing fears and polarizing the public debate in Italy and in other European countries. This article presents the results from the first phase of a research project carried out in Perugia, Italy, in collaboration with the NGO Tamat, an organization whose main focus is international cooperation and sustainable development both in Italy and in other areas of the world such as West Africa and South America. The collaboration takes place within Tamat’s activities supporting training, professional development and the integration of migrants into the Italian society. My research centres on migrants’ and refugees’ strategies for translation in relation to the landscape of an Italian town, and the linguistic skills that they develop in order to establish connections in the host landscape.

The article builds on the current debate on the interaction between translation and the environment in translation studies, combining it with elements from sociolinguistics: especially the notion of how speakers mobilize the linguistic resources that they acquire in their global trajectories, and the unequal distribution of such resources. In this study, food is the starting point for a discussion on how the linguistic meets the material in the definition of human relations in contexts of mobility. As people move around the world, food helps maintain transnational links, contributes to exchanges with the host community or catalyzes anti-migrant sentiment. How does food turn the migrant (and, in this case, the asylum seeker) into a translator? What are the specific competences that are involved in the process of translating food, and how do they come into play when – as it is the case with asylum seekers – the possibilities for self-expressions are constrained?

### **Translating space in the context of the refugee crisis**

Since the 1990s, translation studies in its cultural (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999; Buden and Nowotny 2009) and social (Wolf 2011) turns have increasingly paid attention to the links between translation and migration (Cronin 2006; Gentzler 2008; Wolf 2012; Inghilleri 2017). The focus is generally on mechanisms of hybridity and negotiation, also influenced by Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space" (1994) where new meaning comes into being as a product of encounters, beyond the illusion of fixity and purity. Cultural translation scholarship sees contact between cultures as "a location of re-thinking, or as an imaginative space, in which cultural orientations are radically thought anew", thresholds are trespassed and "questions of identity" come into play which ultimately "challenge authenticity and foreground the transgressive, which in the widest sense can be understood as the result of translation" (Wolf 2012, 71–72). This metaphorical understanding of migration as translation is based on the very practical notion that for migrants, translation is a matter of life or death (Cronin 2006, 45): self-realization in the new context depends heavily on the ability to understand a new language and communicate needs and aspirations to the host community. Refugees and asylum seekers represent a special category of translated individuals, since the state enacts on them what Cristiana Giordano calls a "violent translation" by reducing the asylum seeker to a life story that may or may not grant them asylum, "an act of misrecognition since the other is often irreducible to the stories that the state expects to hear" (2014, 11). If translation is by necessity a process of selecting from a source text the elements that will work in a target context, the translation of asylum seekers' life stories is a selection of those elements that after a long bureaucratic process will either cast them as destitute refugees or unwanted illegal aliens.

Asylum seekers coming to Italy in recent times are highly regulated in terms of the transference of bodies: according to the Dublin regulation, (Regulation [EU] No 604/2013) asylum seekers may only apply for international protection in their first EU country of arrival. Their possibilities for self-expression are constrained by the institutions that may or may not grant them permission to stay. In this scenario, linguistic inequalities mirror political and economic ones. As Pierre Bourdieu (1991) theorized, every linguistic exchange exists in terms of power relations. In times of globalization this means that people "manage or fail to make sense across contexts" because "their linguistic and communicative resources are mobile or lack such semiotic mobility, and this is a problem not just of difference, but of inequality" (Blommaert 2010, 3). Largely reduced to silence

at a time where they are most present in the public debate, the only tangible sign of asylum seekers' transference across global flows is their very presence in Italian cities – a presence that is often contested.

Translation in contexts of migration takes place in close connection with the spatial and material dimensions of the immigrant neighbourhood and the spaces migrants traverse in their journeys. This explains the development of studies focusing on cities as areas of translation (Simon 2012; Cronin and Simon 2014; Meylaerts and Gonne 2014). As Moira Inghilleri remarks, “the process of resituating and renegotiating cultural signs cannot be reduced to ethnic struggles floating free of history or economics, nor of the landscapes that from time to time come to embody them both” (2017, 143).

This comes at a time when sociolinguists are also increasingly concerned with the links between language use and spatial dimensions in contexts of migration. The so-called *metrolingual* (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010) and *translanguaging* (Garcia and Wei 2014) approaches to language contact have a clear spatial dimension: the former in particular pays special attention to the global metropolis where “people of different and mixed backgrounds use, play with and negotiate identities through language; ... its focus is not on language systems but on languages as emergent from contexts of interaction” (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010, 246). Not only are speakers capable of drawing freely on their linguistic repertoires, but these repertoires are built in relation to space, the result of constant interaction between “the repertoires formed during individual life trajectories” and “the available linguistic resources in particular places” (ibid., 166). Few studies that adopt a translanguaging perspective also involve a focus on translation as a part of multilingual space; notable exceptions include the interdisciplinary research project “TLANG – Translation and Translanguaging” (2014–2018). Recent outputs by scholars participating in TLANG underline how speakers in multilingual urban environments employ translanguaging and translation together to turn miscommunications into successful interactions (Creese, Blackledge and Hu 2018).

From the point of view of the task at hand, it is crucial to see how asylum seekers accumulate and employ linguistic resources in relation to their spatial trajectories – but also to realize how translation, or the lack of it, is a key operation in their lives, in the management of their difference and in the realization of inequality with respect to the local communities. However, asylum seekers

who engage productively in translation can create an existence for themselves in the host country, although this also depends on the reception.

### **Untranslatable food**

In this article, I take food as an example of a field where the linguistic meets the non-linguistic (in terms of sensory experience, but also in terms of marketplace and policy) and which is a key marker of cultural belonging and hybridity in contexts of migration. While “the relationship between food, culture and translation remains under-researched” (Chiaro and Rossato 2015, 237), it is precisely in context of migration that food acts most crucially as a link between cultures in a productive but also problematic way. Restaurants and grocery shops are crucial scenarios of what Amanda Wise and Selvaraj Velayutham call “everyday multiculturalism” – the “everyday practice and lived experience of diversity in specific situations” (2009, 3).

In his latest book, *Eco-Translation* (2017), Michael Cronin engages with the challenges that translation may face in the age of the human-induced climate change. He dedicates a chapter to food, and argues for translation as a tool for understanding what happens to food as it travels across cultures. However, at first glance it seems that travelling food is most visible because of its untranslatability. Migrant food appears as untranslated words (burrito, cappuccino, nasi goreng, döner kebab, etc.) in metrolingual interaction, capable of creating immediate links with other parts of the world through the interplay of objects and language. Commenting on a Bangladeshi-owned shop in Sydney, Alastair Pennycook remarks that the shop’s multilingual nature is not only in the languages one hears there (Bangla, Arabic, English) but also in the goods on sale: “The products themselves have their own trajectories, from adaptable artefacts like imported frozen fish, to locally packed imported spices and regionally grown vegetables” (2017, 275). Personal mobility and food are everyday realizations of global flows, nodes of more or less organized networks mobilizing objects as well as people and words, coming together in unpredictable ways to produce meaning. Individuals on these nodes face translation challenges on a daily basis: should an Anglo-Australian customer enter the shop observed by Pennycook, and ask for information about the fish mentioned above (called *rui* in Bangla), the shop owner may present them with the untranslated Bangla word, try to find an English equivalent, or explain the fish in terms of habitat, purpose etc., as one might in a footnote.

The translational quality of food, Cronin argues, has to do with mutability that goes beyond the name and includes meaningful changes that traveling food undergoes:

The meat, the sauce, the pasta, the water that will be used to produce a spaghetti bolognese will differ from London to Toyko to Cape Town even if the term in Roman letter or Japanese characters suggests immutability. Migration, mobility involves mutability. There is no *translatio* without transformation, translation. To put it differently, the fiction of the untranslated masks the inevitability of the translated .... (2017, 49)

The fact that some artefacts are, as Pennycook calls them, “adaptable”, implies that they not only exist as part of the linguistic resources that speakers mobilize as they travel, but that they can be adapted to fit the new context: food is translated, that is to say carried across both physically and in terms of discourse, to the point that the food that is consumed in the target culture is rarely the same as the food that the migrant tastes “back home” – changes may occur in taste, but most importantly in meaning. Vegetables that are “unmarked ‘greens’” in Thailand become “exotic, signs of the shop’s excellence, and means to position as world citizens” in Copenhagen (Karrebæk 2017, 465). It is precisely this shift in meaning and role that marks the mobilization of food as an instance of cultural translation, as it includes an (inter)lingual dimension but also encompasses the transmission and transformation of meaning across borders, and the creation of hybrid meaning in the process.

Food translation may not necessarily involve textual translation, but there is a sense of a source and target in the way in which food becomes something else in the target culture, potentially impacting its foodways – intended as “behaviours and beliefs surrounding the production, distribution and consumption of food” (Counihan 1999, 6). Bhabha’s definition of cultural translation as the “staging of cultural difference” (1994, 227) refers precisely to the potential of the foreign to impact cultural, social and discursive modes of communication: a process in which the untranslated foreign sign is the catalyst for the creation of new meaning in the target context. As Boris Buden and Stefan Nowotny point out, this does not mean “a sort of extension or overcoming of the narrowness of linguistic concepts of translation” but rather involves the cultural, political and social implications already present in purely linguistic understandings of translation (2009, 203). When it comes to the translation of food, it is possible to see how interlingual

translation (from international editions of cookbooks to a waiter's explanation of a dish to a customer) coexists with social, political, and ecological factors determining transformation (of foodways, in this case). It is difficult to separate the linguistic from the non-linguistic as they contribute to determine if and how food will fare in the target context – and what will happen to food-related words and discourses. Adaptability and reception, two key terms of translation discourse, are applicable to food in contexts of migration, also in the sense that the transformations undergone may or may not be well received in the target culture. A refusal to incorporate some version of a dish in local foodways or incorporate a version of its name in local linguistic repertoires is a statement on untranslatability: a refusal to accept that the untranslated foreign can produce meaning in a target landscape.

In Italy, anxieties about authenticity and quality of food have often been used as part of anti-immigrant rhetoric, for example in the way in which kebab shops and other foreign-owned food outlets have been used as counterpoints to a discourse in which kebab shops are pitted against an “imaginary past able to sustain the idea of a fixed and well established Italian identity” (Giuliani 2017, 465). In the last decade, a number of local authorities issued laws and regulations limiting the locations, hours of operation, and even language of advertising of take-away shops: these laws are generally known as *anti-kebab* laws in everyday discourse (D'Amico 2009).

In the context of the refugee crisis, African asylum seekers find themselves having little control over the translation of food. The quality of the food that they eat in reception centres varies considerably according to the institution and type of program; African food is available only in specific shops which may not exist in smaller communities. More importantly, asylum seekers and refugees are at risk of becoming undeclared workers in Italian agriculture: 80% of the estimated 430,000 undeclared workers in Italian fields are foreigners, working twelve hours a day, seven days a week and for extremely low wages (Ceccarelli and Cicone 2018). Tomatoes and other vegetables picked by these precarious workers will subsequently be packaged in a way that responds to Italian and foreign expectations about Italian quality, genuineness etc., and shipped to consumers across Europe. The voices of migrant workers have been excluded from the public debate until recently, when investigations (such as Sagnet and Palmisano's 2015 book *Ghetto Italia*) have exposed their living conditions. Landscapes, as Inghilleri (2017, 141) notes, contain “an archaeological record of visibility and invisibility in the translation of cultures” in the distinction between those who are just passing through as expendable workforce and those who

are allowed to settle. African migrants in Italy live the paradoxical condition of being extremely visible in public spaces and the public discourse and at the same time having very limited control over their interactions with the landscape. Food, as one of the crucial markers of traveling cultures in a globalized world can be used to explore migrant visibility and invisibility.

In order to examine these issues, I will use a case study of discussions held during language classes for African migrants enrolled in an agricultural training course held by the Italian NGO Tamat.

### **Materials and methods**

This research is part of a three-year project called LINCOS (Language Integration and New Communities in a Multicultural Society), co-funded by the Irish Research Council and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, and carried out with Tamat's assistance. The project investigates language and translation as means of inclusion or exclusion in Italy at the time of the refugee crisis. It follows projects that aim at the integration of mobile individuals (and asylum seekers in particular) in the area of Perugia, using the ethnographic methods of observation, individual interviews and the analysis of recorded language classes. The research aims at identifying aspects in the territory that create areas of (un)translatability between newcomers and locals, and investigates how the newcomers employ their old and new linguistic resources to express themselves and establish themselves as members of the community.

Founded in 1995 in Perugia, Tamat has developed international cooperation and rural development projects for most of its existence, operating especially in West Africa, South America and the Balkans. In view of recent developments in the flow of migrants between Africa and Italy, Tamat have decided to deploy their experience with empowerment and social entrepreneurship in Western Africa (area of origin of many who have recently crossed the Mediterranean) in the field of migrant empowerment locally. Having identified urban agriculture as a potentially rewarding activity in terms of social inclusion, and gender as a sensitive issue, in 2016 they launched *Urbagri4Women*. Funded by the EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the project provides migrant women in seven European countries with language courses and agriculture



training, as well as starting Urban Agricultural Labs (UALs) where they could practice what they had learned and socialize with members of the host community.

I have employed the ethnographic method throughout the study, in order to capture the practical relevance of (mis)translation in the asylum seekers' lives. This method has had currency in translation studies for some time, especially when it comes to considering translators or interpreters as “communities of practice” (Flynn 2010). More recently, Wine Tisseur (2017) has used linguistic ethnography methods to investigate the translation practices of NGOs. During the present research, working alongside the NGO staff in *Urbagri4Women* has allowed me to have insight not only into the translation experiences of asylum seekers in Italy, but also into the strategies that NGO workers employ to bridge communicative gaps with them. Between November 2017 and May 2018, I taught Italian to the project beneficiaries, and acted as an interpreter during the agricultural course taught by a local agronomist. This role put me in a position of authority with respect to the asylum seekers, albeit as a figure – the teacher – who can be seen as a mediator between them and the local community.

34 students attended at least one class, and twenty of these stayed for the duration of the project. The students were either in the process of applying for refugee status or had recently received it. Their countries of origin were roughly representative of the general distribution of asylum seekers in Italy, including Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana, Mali, Senegal, Guinea-Conakry, Ivory Coast, Iraq, and Venezuela (all but two came from Africa). Early into the course, Tamat's staff decided to admit a restricted number of male students: the reasons for doing this were the high level of motivation shown by some men (often having been invited by women who were already taking the course), and the promotion of gender equality among male asylum seekers, since the project remained explicitly aimed at the inclusion of women.

Levels of Italian for African students varied from A1 to B1, depending on time spent in Italy, ranging from 5 months to 2 years 3 months. African students were proficient in either French or English (the latter sometimes acted as a lingua franca among them and with others). They were all proficient in a number of African languages; some of these languages were sometimes used in class and during UALs by students from the same region or who spoke languages with high degrees of mutual intelligibility (such as Bambara and Mandinka).

Recordings took place between 6 March and 15 May 2018, in the final two months of the course, when a stable group of students had been established. Two professional interpreters helped me explain the scope and goal of the study to the students. I recorded twelve classes, covering topics ranging from agricultural sciences to basic business and marketing (all of them contributing to the overall goal of using urban agricultural labs to create a business idea and a business plan). I also took 51 research notes between 22 November 2017 and 15 May 2018, amounting to more than 40,000 words.

All classes took place in Fontivegge, a multicultural area of Perugia; the Urban Agricultural Labs took place nearby, in the gardens of the Montemorcinio abbey. The material environment of the classroom included a laptop computer with internet connection and a projector. Smartphones, which are crucial artefacts in the trajectory of the present-day asylum seeker (used for communication as well as GPS orientation and online translation) were also present and widely used by the students. The presence of the devices in class was not irrelevant, as we shall see, as it connected the classroom to the rest of the world, making it possible for both teachers and students to access virtually infinite repositories of data from different localities without leaving the room. This instant connection to the world did not, on the other hand, smooth all problems of communication, as a range of other problems intervened where students and teachers had to make use of their own translation abilities to reach a precarious form of common understanding.

## **Analysis**

### ***Translating food in the classroom***

Translation activities happened in the class at many levels: although all lessons were supposed to take place in Italian, teachers would sometimes be asked to translate a word into English or French; this translation was sometimes in turn discussed in the students' preferred languages. Most importantly, the socio-political and spatial aspects of translation played an important part, which both Tamat's staff and the students acknowledged.

Jan Blommaert pointed out that an asylum seeker finds himself or herself in a "very vulnerable position" in the global age, "even if his position is *definitional* of globalization" (2010, 179, my emphasis). These highly globalized subjects, capable of generating connections across

continents are nevertheless very conscious that their linguistic resources are of little use in the context of their asylum application. Most studies on refugee language learners underline how refugees are extremely conscious of the equation between knowing the language of the host country and securing a better future for themselves and their families (De Costa 2010; Duran 2017). The case of African asylum seekers in Italy in the current crisis, however, involves a high degree of devaluation of their existing resources, as well as a contested, uncertain and constrained existence in the host country which impacts their possibilities for self-expression.

Africa is a constellation of languages (currently 2,143, according to Ethnologue)<sup>1</sup> over which a few colonial, transnational languages (French, English, Portuguese, Arabic, etc.) were imposed. Formed in a long and troubled trajectory across the remnants of colonialism, the linguistic repertoires of the asylum seekers in the class have very little currency in Italy; their multilingualism has no place in the “orderly ... predicates of the EU’s twenty-four-member-language civic palette” as implemented through the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) (Gramling 2016, 63). West African asylum seekers generally speak English or French, two of the most widely used among those twenty-four languages (albeit the varieties they speak would be devalued in the UK or France), but Italian is not in their repertoires. Italian authorities relegate them to A0/A1 levels of the CEFR in the courses that they are offered as part of the reception programs for asylum seekers. The Italian teaching community, on the other hand, have started to reflect on the best strategies to approach asylum seeker students, who are often very skilled multilinguals but have varying levels of education and literacy (D’Agostino 2017).

Migrant language learning is always “an investment in a learner’s own identity” (Norton 2013, 11), and the asylum seekers’ investment in Italian reflects their peculiar predicament: while some appear to be motivated by what they see as a fresh start and wish to make the most of their stay, others refrain from learning the language due to the precariousness of their residency status, or to the fact that their intended destination was not Italy but France or Northern Europe.<sup>2</sup>

The language teacher, therefore, does not only provide asylum seekers with linguistic resources for their everyday existence but also acts as one of the institutions that control and enable their translation into the host society. In the case at hand, several students declared that they had taken the course to demonstrate their level of integration to the authorities who may in the end grant them the eagerly awaited residency permit.

In the context of the *Urbagri4Women* course, the challenges that Tamat's staff and I faced in terms of translation highlighted not only the social dimension of translation but also how the topics of food and agriculture raise translational questions that could not be answered without analyzing environmental factors along with language. Talking about seasons in Italian, a series of four pictures of the type that several European language teachers would use (a tree covered in snow, and then covered in leaves and flowers, and so on) would generate confusion in students used to differentiating between a dry and rainy season. In this case, it is not a matter of translating *primavera* into colonial languages (as *spring* or *printemps*) but of building an exchange on how seasons work in Italy and in the West of Africa. Similarly, a lesson on key products of the local economy, such as olive oil and cured meat, could generate discussions and negotiations among students who may not be used to cooking with olive oil, or who do not eat pork for religious reasons.

In addition to translating Italian food vocabulary and foodways, we also ended up translating elements from various African food-related repertoires. This happened in the context of the UALs, where Tamat decided to give the students a possibility to grow not only typical Italian vegetables but also vegetables from their home countries. The discussion that followed put the African students in the position of translators, translating their food to the Italian teaching staff. I would like to concentrate on a discussion about specific African products (yam, okra, *kélén-kélén*) which took place on 6 March 2018.

The question of what to call African products in Italian had come up before, as evident from a field note from a few weeks earlier:

When at the end I told them they could ask me any question even unrelated to the course, Martin<sup>3</sup> asked “cosa è questa parola in italiano?” and wrote down “yam” in his notebook. [...] I said “manioca” but he (and others, who were leaving) said no, and then we looked together on Wikipedia and could not find the answer. When I came back to the office, I found out it's “igname”. (field note, 2 February 2018)

Questions such as “how do you say X in language Y?” are crucial for the development of a target repertoire, relying heavily on the speaker's translation competences. That question, however, is often only the beginning of a discussion where background knowledge comes into play, as the case

at hand will show. After I revealed in class that the Italian for yam is *igname*, the students and I discussed its nature and uses:

### Excerpt 1.

A: Researcher. J: Joy (Nigeria). L: Lucy (Nigeria). M: Mohamed (Sierra Leone). I: Ismaila (Mali).

1. A: è più dolce d- è un po' più mh ... zuccherino delle patate vero? [IT. *It's sweeter than it's a little more sugary than potatoes, right?*]
2. M: er uhm
3. J: more sweet?
4. M: yam non non non c'entra [IT. *Yam has nothing to do with it*]
5. A: non c'entra con le patate [IT. *It has nothing to do with potatoes*]
6. L: [non c'entra [IT. *Nothing to do with it*]
7. A: eh sì eh no effettivamente [IT. *Uh yes uh no in fact*]
8. I: patate dolci è ((xxxxx)) [IT. *Sweet potatoes is ((xxxxx))*]
9. L: tu pia- tu prepara tu piace dai zucchini o dai sal- salt sale ((xxxxx)) [IT. *You like you prepare you like you give zucchini or you give salt ((xxxxx))*]
10. ((laughs in the background))
11. A: ((laughs)) okay
12. J: [that one you like ((laughs))]
13. L: you want to put sugar you put sugar you want to put salt salt

Distinctions such as the one between savoury and sweet depend on our biological ability to experience taste but our experience of these distinctions depends on how “members of different speech communities may infuse specific distinctions with meaning and employ these in the course

of ‘embodied practices’” (Dimmendaal 2016, 22). Distinctions between savoury and sweet foods may be less clear-cut in some cultures than others – in our example, as Lucy explains, yams can be cooked with sugar or salt. This explanation corroborates my translation by adding a layer of meaning in Italian and then clarifies it in English: Lucy from Nigeria may not have a “high” level of Italian according to the CEFR, yet she mobilizes her linguistic resources, including the ones she just acquired (I use the word *zuccherino*, “sugary”, and she tries to repeat it but says *zucchino*, “courgette”, before clarifying in English). She uses these resources to translate her foodways for the benefit of the teacher. However, if the students and teachers succeed in negotiating a translation of yam that satisfies all criteria, another food creates more problems.

### ***How do you say kélén-kélén?***

On the same March 6 class, students and teachers were discussing okra. This vegetable is a staple of West African cuisine and is quite common around the world, but is not well known in Italy. Thérèse, from Cameroon, contributed to the discussion by adding another product to the list:

#### **Excerpt 2.**

A: Researcher. T: Thérèse (Cameroon).

14. T: Sì, ho pensa- ho pensato ma c'è anche- c'è anche un prodotto come akro, ma quelli non è come akro, sì, è- non so sicura [IT. *Yes I thought- I thought there's also- there's also a product like okra but it's not like okra, yes it's- I'm not sure*]

15. A: Come si chiama? [IT. *What is it called?*]

16. T: Si chiama ... in francese kélén-kélén [IT. *It's called ... in French kélén-kélén*]

As Thérèse is the only Cameroonian in the class, this remark generated a somewhat long discussion, in Italian, English and French, over *kélén-kélén*. What is it, and what part of it do you eat – the fruit, the root or the leaf? If – as Thérèse claims – it is like okra, how similar is it? In the discussion, the students mobilized all their linguistic resources and background knowledge in order to negotiate the meaning of *kélén-kélén* and create a shared translation of it for the sake of the teachers, who in turn mobilized their own resources to come up with answers. Two students from

Nigeria, Joy and Lucy, and one student from Sierra Leone, Mohamed, join in the discussion. Following the impulse of the Nigerian women, the conversation rapidly switches into English – which Thérèse has some command of, even though she makes some efforts to return to French (her preferred European language) and Italian (the language of the class):

**Excerpt 3.**

J: Joy (Nigeria). T: Thérèse (Cameroon). M: Mohamed (Sierra Leone)

17. M: That is ... the nut is

18. J: [The seed!

19. T: Yes

20. J: For planting

21. T: Yes aspetta ((xxxxx)) [IT. *Yes wait ((xxxxx))*]

22. J: You can see the ((xxxxx))

23. M: This one you use the fruit or the- you use the leaf?

24. T: Oui! [FR. *Yes!*]

25. M: The leaf or the fruit?

26. T: Oui! [FR. *Yes!*]

27. M: mh mh?

28. T: ... On dit comme ça comme ça ça ((voices overlapping, interrupting Thérèse))  
[FR. *We say it like that like that that*]

This constitutes a metrolingual interaction, not just because of the different repertoires at play, but because the speakers attempt to negotiate the meaning and create a common understanding of the seemingly untranslatable *kélén-kélén*. In this regard, Cronin (2017, 60) observes that foods possess a sort of “translational productivity” as they travel, which expands the scope of the translator’s

task: the example that he uses is that of an American attempting to find sour cream in France and wondering if *crème fraîche* will work in the same recipe. Like the search for the meaning of *kélén-kélén*, the comparison between types of cream brings about technical questions, such as the different levels of sourness in the cream (and the type of bacterial culture that is responsible for it) as well as the recipes where it may or may not be an ingredient (which in turn are more or less ingrained in the source culture):

The attempt to find an equivalent in the other language is in *effect a form of slowing down where attention focusses on the definitional field of “sour cream” and the forms of sour cream found in other languages and cultures*. What is striking in the discussion is that the act of translation foregrounds the buried cultural and linguistic complexity of items that are frequently taken for granted in the culture of origin. (Cronin 2017, 61, my emphasis)

Food and foodways have a complex relationship with nature and the material resources available in a given space, and this complicates any attempt to translate key food-related terms by simply saying “how do you say X in language Y?” The solution that Cronin proposes in his examination of translation ecology is slowing down in order to enhance the translator’s focus, by focusing on things such as definition and use of the food in question. This presupposes translation skills as well as different types of background knowledge (nutritional values, recipes and preparation, seasonality and so on).

As the Nigerian and Sierra Leonean students “slow down” together with the Italian teachers to negotiate the meaning of *kélén-kélén*, they attempt to determine whether it is another name for okra or not; and if it is not, how similar it is in terms of taste and use. Joy and the others’ goal seems to be finding a translation that is acceptable from their Anglophone west African perspective.

#### **Excerpt 4.**

A: Researcher. J: Joy (Nigeria). L: Lucy (Nigeria). T: Thérèse (Cameroon). M: Mohamed (Sierra Leone)

29. M: Thérèse! that one we cannot use the ... the fruit we use only the

30. J: [leaf!



31. multiple voices, overlapping: the leaf yes
32. A: okay ...
33. L: but they dry like okra
34. J: is not okra but
35. T: is not okra yes now
36. J: but is similar to okra

In their attempts to negotiate the meaning of *kélén-kélén*, Joy and the others discuss *kélén-kélén* leaves in comparison to their food-related frame of reference – if okra leaves are commonly eaten, is this the case with *kélén-kélén* as well? My own experience of okra (as fruit sold in ethnic markets in Ireland and Italy) however, did not include this particular use.

As I participated in the discussion with my limited knowledge of the different uses and recipes for okra, I made use of the seemingly endless repository of information that is Google. Whereas Google Translate promises to minimize the efforts of translation and eliminate distance between languages (a claim which I will not discuss here), search engines in general may prove useful in determining meaning in this type of culturally determined negotiation, providing information and pictures of previously unknown artefacts. However, even in this age of globalized, cosmopolitan cuisine, Google may not necessarily eliminate the cognitive and material distance between interlocutors and some transnational food. The website of the Cameroonian ministry of tourism explicitly states that *kélén-kélén* is, in fact, okra leaf:

Le Gombo est l'un des légumes préférés des africains. Cette plante donne aussi des feuilles comestibles et largement consommées en Afrique. Au Cameroun on les appelle *kélén-kélén* ou *tee'e* (Beti). (Ministère du Tourisme)

*Okra is one of Africa's most loved vegetables. This plant also provides edible leaves which are widely used in Africa. In Cameroon we call them *kélén-kélén* or *tee'e* (Beti). [my translation]*

Thanks to my smartphone, this information was immediately available to me in Perugia, but this did not make the translation of Thérèse's personal experience any easier:

**Excerpt 5.**

A: Researcher. D: Domenico (Italy), Tamat's project manager. J: Joy (Nigeria). T: Thérèse (Cameroon).  
L: Lucy (Nigeria).

37. A: ((xxxxx)) dal kélén-kélén vediamo un po' clicca sul sito sono foglie di gombo sono foglie di okra lui dice che sono [IT. ((xxxxx)) *from kélén-kélén let's see click on the website it's gombo leaf it's okra leaf it says here*]

38. D: qui loro dicono che sono foglie di gombo [IT. *Here they say it's okra leaf*]

39. T: sì ma quella non è foglia di gombo eh [IT. *But that's not okra leaf*]

40. D: ((xxxxx))

41. T: sì [IT. *yes*]

42. D: allora sbagliano lì perchè dicono il kelen è foglia di gombo [IT. *Then they're wrong because they say kélén is okra leaf*]

43. A: vediamo un po' com'è su ingredienti [IT. *Let's check the ingredients*]

44. T: ah

45. A: kélén-kélén

46. L: I want to know ma-

47. A: feuilles de gombo [FR. *Okra leaf*]

48. T: is the end na they cut like this is coming like this is similar

Was the ministerial website right and Thérèse wrong, even if she seemed to know the precise shape of *kélén-kélén* leaves? Another informant from Cameroon, when asked that question, replied that

*kélén-kélén* is not okra but another plant which he described to me but whose French name he could not remember.

While most Francophone African recipe websites that appear on a Google search identify *kélén-kélén* as “feuilles de gombo”, there is at least one web source that identifies it with a plant that is known as jute mallow in English, and has several names across cultures:

Le Jângô chez les Bassas ou *kélén-kélén* chez nos cousins Bafia, Tégue chez l'Ewondo, Corète Potagère ou encore Jute Potager chez les Français, *Corchorus olitorius* en Grec ou Latin. La corète potagère (*Corchorus olitorius* L.) est une espèce de plantes dicotylédones de la famille des Tiliaceae originaire d'Inde. (Camerdish)

(Known as *jângô* among the Bassas or *kélén-kélén* among our Bafia cousins, *tégue* among the Ewondo, *corète potagère* or also *jute potager* among the French, *Corchorus olitorius* in Greek or Latin [sic]. *Jute mallow* is a species of dicotyledon plant from the *Tiliaceae* family, originating from India.) [my translation]

When I showed him a picture of jute mallow that I found on the internet, my Cameroonian informant confirmed that it is *kélén-kélén*. It has not been possible to ascertain how the term *kélén-kélén* came to indicate jute mallow (*Corchorus olitorius*) for my informants and for the website above; and okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*) leaf sauce for other web sources, including the Ministry of Tourism website.

The Camerdish website, however, provides fascinating clues on the translational journey of this plant, whose names appear quite different in various Cameroonian languages (Bassa, Bafia, Ewondo), in French and in Latin. The different names correspond to different experiences of the plant, and different communicative needs. If the Latin term *Corchorus Olitorius*, assigned to the plant in virtue of the rules of taxonomy introduced by Linnaeus in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, works for a worldwide community of botanists, the French *corète potagère* works in a widespread, global *Francophonie*. In Cameroon, the colonial French term coexists with the Bassa or Ewondo terms used by those who consume the leaves as part of their daily diet, speakers who nevertheless may only recur to translation into (or through) the colonial language if they want to ensure transmission outside of Cameroon. Here as well, the problem goes beyond the linguistic: jute mallow being a tropical plant known in Europe mostly for the textile fibres made from it, rather than for its edible

leaves, the whole experience that Thérèse talks about (drying *kélén-kélén* leaves to make a sauce) is lost on the Italian teachers. In the difficulty of translating between *kélén-kélén* and the Italian *iuta*, the conglomerate of experiences that the former conveys is lost. Translation comes a little easier for the other African students, who have similar experiences of using the same plant, or similar plants, for the same type of food preparation; yet they have to negotiate the meaning via French or English as well, since they are not familiar with the term *kélén-kélén* itself. For both teachers and classmates, translating *kélén-kélén* means a laborious negotiation that brings them in contact, at least partially, with Thérèse's specific, localized repertoire and background knowledge.

## Conclusion

In the context of the asylum seeker's interactions with the host country, untranslatability is not just a question of words rendered with difficulty into a target language. What is untranslatable is often a whole set of experiences, values and practices, and the reasons for this untranslatability are cultural, economic, juridical, and spatial as well as linguistic. Untranslatability is an aspect of the precariousness characterizing the asylum seeker's life as he or she attempts to manage linguistic resources in relation to the material resources available in a given space, from the perspective of someone who may or may not be granted permission to inhabit that space.

Food (and foodways) is only one example of the untranslatable in the asylum seeker experience, but a particularly relevant one. Food encompasses the linguistic and the non-linguistic, it is localized in space and highly mobile at the same time. Most importantly, food has the potential of becoming a means of inclusion as well as exclusion of newcomers in a society. Existing patterns of inequality in the globalized world determine inclusion or exclusion, as well as the possibilities for translation to bridge this gap: when Creese, Blackledge and Hu (2018, 851) discuss operations of translanguaging and translation around a butcher's stall owned by a Chinese/Malaysian family in Birmingham (UK) as the "normalization of difference" they write about opportunities that are legally and practically denied to the participants in this study.

To the asylum seekers in this study, food is a mark of the difference that they represent and encounter in the Italian society. Our conversations about yam, okra and *kélén-kélén* indicate the distance – not only linguistic, but cultural, and grounded in practice as well as experience – that

translation efforts have to cover when negotiating the meaning of such diverse food. The conversations, and the strategies that teachers and students employ, are examples of everyday cultural translation, where the translation of words, the simple question “How do you say *kélén-kélén* in Italian?”, opens a discussion on practices that are ingrained in different cultures and locales around the world, and whose meaning moves according to laws of inequality. In the end, *kélén-kélén* proved to be far from untranslatable, but its translation required an approach that was not limited to the translation of words: a form of “slowing down”, as Cronin would say, to concentrate on the definitional field of the term.

This type of conversation, which is performed by countless individuals daily in the context of the refugee crisis, requires a certain effort. What are the possible outcomes? Shortly after this class took place, Tamat started the first Urban Agricultural Lab in Perugia, where okra is grown. The vegetable garden is being managed by Tamat’s staff in collaboration with a local agronomist and the group of students, each of them providing their own expertise in the translation of the crop from Africa to the hills of central Italy. The choice was not casual, and it underlines the material constraints that come with the translation of food (constraints which remain as yet understudied by translation scholars): among the many African vegetables mentioned in the classroom, okra is one which will grow in the Italian climate, one which would prove easier to “translate” materially into the Italian context (in the same way as corn or tomatoes have been “translated” into Europe from the Americas). If untranslatability in the context of the refugee crisis means also the impossibility to leave a mark on the host landscape, conversations that bridge gaps and attempt to negotiate meaning are, sometimes, a prelude to the creation of an inclusive landscape.

### **Transcription conventions**

((word)): paralinguistic feature

((xxxxx)): unclear speech

word-: self-interrupted speech

[word: overlapping speech

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### **Note on contributor**

Andrea Ciribuco completed his PhD at the National University of Ireland, Galway in 2016, with a thesis on Italian-American author and translator Emanuel Carnevali. A monograph based on the thesis is set to appear in 2019. Since October 2017, he has been a postdoctoral research fellow at NUI Galway, funded by the Irish Research Council and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. His current project investigates life narratives, translation and untranslatability in Italy in the context of the contemporary migration and refugee crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> While the number provides an indication of Africa's striking linguistic diversity, it is relevant to point out that the existence of languages as discrete, countable entities has been challenged by sociolinguistics. Especially when looking at Africa, it is helpful to see languages as socio-political, historically determined constructions based on colonial and postcolonial planning (Makoni and Pennycook 2005).

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<sup>2</sup> Recent studies on more settled African communities in Italy underline how migrants with a residency permit similarly choose what languages to learn based on their usefulness across their own trajectories, refusing for example to learn regional dialects/languages and acknowledging that Italian is only useful within Italian borders (Guerini 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Names of research participants have been replaced with pseudonyms.

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