Culinary subjectification

The translated world of menus and orders

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The idea for this article began with a couple of innocent questions: How would one translate the word "menu" (i.e., restaurant menu) into the native languages of people without any experience of restaurants and menus? And how would you explain to them how ordering from the menu works? It quickly became clear that translating the *word* "menu" entails not only translating the *world* of restaurant-going and ordering from the menu but also our (i.e., ideal-typically Western) very conceptual and social world, which is another way to say that what seems to be a humble piece of paper listing a certain number of dishes is itself made by the world in which it is found and in turn contributes in a significant way to making that world. In this article I examine the restaurant menu as a world-making social and translocutional/transinscriptional technology (the menu as menu-logic and cosmo-menu). As a kind of *text act* that is situated at but one of many "iterative/inscriptional stations" along an indeterminate and continuous chain of translocutions and transinscriptions, the menu highlights the *temporal* dimension of all kinds of translations (translingual, intralingual, transmodal, transcultural, etc.).

Keywords: translation, iterative/inscriptional stations, translocution, text acts, the menu, culinary subjectification

Introduction: Translating words and worlds

Perhaps we can start with a thought exercise: How would you translate the word "menu" (i.e., restaurant menu) into the native language of an (imaginary) tribal people (with no writing and no restaurants)? And how would you explain to them how ordering from the menu works?

Can we merely translate the restaurant menu into the native language as "a written list of dishes from which diners choose while dining in a restaurant"? It is my contention that we cannot explain the restaurant menu to these "prerestaurant" and "premenu" tribal people without explaining our whole conceptual and social world to them: What is a restaurant? What is eating out? What is a meal? What is dinner (or lunch)? Why would you need to make a reservation or queue in line for a table?

What is a table? What is "getting seated"? Why is the eating area separate from the cooking area? What is a waiter? What is a cook? Why entrust a stranger to cook for you? Why trust food that you have not raised, grown, hunted, or caught yourself? Why are you eating with strangers sitting next to and around you? What is a course (appetizer, main course, dessert)? Why can't we eat everything altogether? What is a portion? What is ordering and taking an order? Why can't one order everything on the menu? What is choice? Why can you only eat food from the dish placed in front of you? Why are people eating in a group nevertheless eating different food? Why drink certain kinds of drink with certain kinds of dishes? Why do people talk while eating? Why is the restaurant so dark? Why is there a lit candle on the table? What is writing? What is a list? What is a price? What is money? What is a bill (or check)? Why do you have to pay for the food? What is a tip? What is a credit card? What is a receipt? Why are some dishes more expensive than others? Why can't we sleep in the restaurant? To this list we might also add: What is a take-away? What is a take-away menu? What is a children's menu? What is a vegetarian menu?, And so on.

Clearly, translating the *word* "menu" entails not only translating the *world* of restaurant-going and ordering from the menu but our very conceptual and social world (i.e., ideal-typically Western or Western-style), which is another way of saying that what seems to be a humble piece of paper listing a certain number of dishes is itself made by the world in which it is found and in turn contributes in a significant way to making that world. In this article I shall examine the restaurant menu as a world-making social and translocutional/transinscriptional technology.

The article is divided into several sections. I begin by explaining what a menu is and briefly tracing its history before examining, in the second section, the role of the menu in terms of social practices that it entails in the worlds of restaurant cooking and dining. In the following section I explain how the menu embodies (culinary) choice as an ideology. The menu is then examined as a translocutional/transinscriptional technology, and ordering from the menu is considered as a process of translating along a multitude of "iterative/inscriptive stations." In the fifth section, I look at menu planning as a process of translating from the chef's professional culinary language to the customers' language, and how both are constantly being transformed because of these incessant acts of translation. I then propose the term "culinary subjectification" to examine how customers resonate their culinary world with that which is embodied in the menu. This is further explicated through two common practices: the seeking of the culinary Other (mediated by the "textographic Other" which is the menu proffering exotic-sounding dishes and even written in exotic scripts) and abandoning the menu altogether and surrendering oneself to the dictates of the chef. In the penultimate section I examine the waiter's order slip as a specimen of "text acts," which call forth and actualize the dishes ordered and the meal composed by the customer. Using the Daoist talisman as an analogy, I argue that the waiter's order slip can be understood as a "potency tender." In the conclusion I explore briefly the implications of this investigation, especially in relation to the intersemiotic connection between orality and the written in processes of translation (between different culinary languages, along iterative/inscriptive stations, etc.). Ultimately this article is an investigation of how *worlds* get translated (and made and transformed) as *words* get uttered, negotiated, inscribed,

transcribed, translated, transmuted, acted upon, and even transsubstantiated (e.g., when an item printed on the menu magically materializes into an actual dish).

If this largely theoretical essay lacks a specific "ethnographic context," it is because I have presumed the cultural competence and complicity of the reader in order for the arguments of this essay to work. If you can provide adequate answers to all the questions evoked above (e.g., What is a restaurant? What is eating out? What is a menu? etc.), you will have been already equipped with the necessary "ethnographic" cultural backgrounds to "picture" the different scenes in subsequent sections (e.g., you will have plenty of your own "menu stories"). There are of course an enormous variety of restaurants, menus, and practices of ordering from the menu. For the purpose of this article I evoke what might be called a "model restaurant" (indeed, even a "modal restaurant," in the statistical sense), a "model menu," a "model diner," and a "model menu-ordering experience" (see Eco [1979] 1984 on the "model reader").

What is a menu?

There are three main usages of the word "menu" in modern social life.[1] In the English language, a menu (the equivalent of *la carte* in French and *die Speisekarte* in German) is a list of itemized dishes from which diners choose for their meals, usually in a restaurant. A second, less common, usage of "menu" is a detailed listing of the dishes the diners will get in the course of a meal, especially at banquets and other formal dining occasions. For example, high-table dinners in Oxbridge colleges always have this kind of menu printed on cards, which are displayed on the dining table for the diners to consult—importantly, these menus also list, alongside the various courses, the accompanying wines. The expression "So what's on the menu?" refers to this usage, inquiring about what is to be served for a meal. (It seems that "bill of fare" used to be the equivalent of "menu," "fare" referring to "food and drinks.") A third usage of "menu" is its pervasive application as a metaphor, usually in a menu-like list of services from which customers can select, in contexts such as course offerings in an academic degree program, different services in a hair or nail salon, "bundled" offers from an internet provider or mobile phone company, or "apps" on a smartphone (but also as in "a menu of disasters"). This article will be primarily examining the first sense of the menu, that is, the restaurant menu, a list of itemized dishes from which diners choose in order to "compose" their meals.

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1. One of the reviewers objected to my "insouciant use of the word 'modern'" owing to its "tacit deictic" meanings, and suggested that I "be more precise about the social range that [I am] attributing to this word." Here I can only resort to the same "escape clause" mentioned in the previous section that invokes the images of the "model restaurant," the "model menu," etc., and so on, and plea for the complicity of the reader of this essay to bring their cultural/ideological upbringing and "prejudices" to bear. In my defense, I do not believe that the word "modern" is necessarily any more guilty of carrying with it "tacit deictic" meanings than are many other words used in this essay.

Food historians have not ascertained when the restaurant menu was invented or where, but there are written testimonies to the existence of restaurant menus in the Song Dynasty (960–1279) in China about one thousand years ago.[2] Apparently the menu did not appear in the West until quite recently, say as late as the eighteenth century, when eating out and restaurants became institutionalized (e.g., MacDonogh 1987: 111; Pembroke 2013: 134–35; but see Carlin 2008).[3] Prior to the appearance of the restaurant menu, people of course also ate outside of their homes (e.g., when they traveled), but they would have to be content with whatever the inn or tavern owner had prepared for that day rather than ordering from a list of possible dishes.[4] When the rich (e.g., aristocrats) traveled in the past, they would stay at the estates of other rich people and dine in, and sometimes they would bring their own cooks and kitchen staff; they did not eat in public (mixing with commoners or within their sight). The rise of the menu (and restaurants) resulted largely from the rise of the bourgeoisie in European history, when dining out among strangers in anonymous spaces became acceptable, and more and more prestige was attached to the pursuit of fine food, culinary diversity, mixed sociality, and the establishment of one's taste or culinary distinction in a public manner (see Bourdieu [1979] 1984).

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2. The following passage describes ordering from menus in the Song Dynasty (Northern Song with Kaifeng as capital and Southern Song with Hangzhou as capital):

> Wine and tea houses in both Kaifeng and Hangchow [Hangzhou] lured customers with such luxuries as paintings by famous artists, flowers, miniature trees, cups and utensils of silver or of porcelain, and of course, with fine food. . . . A Southern Sung source gives a "casual list" of two hundred and thirty-four famous dishes that such places served, a list from the Northern Sung has fifty-one. Dinners probably started with a soup or broth like "hundred-flavors" soup, which heads both lists. They could then choose from dishes made from almost any variety of flesh, fowl, or seafood—milk-steamed lamb, onion-strewn hare, fried clams or crabs. Several kinds of "variety meats," lungs, heart, kidneys, or caul, were cooked in various manners. . . . Ordering was done in approximately the same way in Kaifeng and in Hangchow, where all restaurants had menus. "The men of Kaifeng were extravagant and indulgent. They would shout their orders by the hundreds: some wanted items booked and some chilled, some heated and some prepared, some iced or delicate or fat; each person ordered differently. The waiter then went to get the orders, which he repeated and carried in his head, so that when he got into the kitchen he repeated them. These men were called 'gong heads' or 'callers.' In an instant, the waiter would be back carrying three dishes forked in his left hand, while on his right arm from hand to shoulder he carried about twenty bowls doubled up, and he distributed them precisely as everyone had ordered without an omission or mistake. If there were, the customers would tell the 'head man' who would scold and abuse the waiter and sometimes dock his salary, so severe was the punishment. (Freeman 1977: 160–61; containing a passage in quotation marks translated from Chinese)

3. Since the main content of this article is not on the history of the menu, I beg readers' forgiveness for my cursory treatment regarding this aspect.

4. This is the second sense of the menu as mentioned above, which has retained its use in restaurants as "dishes of the day" ("le menu" in French, as opposed to "à la carte").

What does the menu do? The menu as a social technology

Just as the map is not the territory, the recipe is not the dish, and the blueprint is not the building, the menu is certainly not the meal. A menu facilitates the composition and production of meals. The menu is an inscribed space from which spring a great many possible meals through permutation. Even a modest menu with just a few items can potentially allow a very great number of possible meals, thanks to the structure of modular (see Ledderose 2001) and phased serving of dishes[5]. The menu interpellates the diners, spurs them into action, activates their culinary habitus and subjectivity, fires up their fantasy and appetite, and initiates a chain of actions—translocutional and transinscriptional, among others—that will eventually result in the ordered dishes appearing in front of the diners (more on this below).

But the menu does not only interpellate forward. Even before the diners enter the restaurant, sit down and read it, the menu has already interpellated "backward" all the actions necessary to produce and present all the dishes that it promises. These actions include the hiring and training of the chefs and other personnel (including kitchen assistants, the wait staff, etc.), the procurement of all the necessary ingredients, the fitting of the cooking equipment (stoves, ovens, grills, cooking utensils, etc.), the fitting of the dining room (including tables and chairs, tableware, stemware, cutlery, tablecloths, decorations, etc.), and of course the design and printing of the menu itself. All restaurateurs know that the success and failure of one's restaurant largely rests on the menu, and it is usually the chefs who have a decisive voice in its final range and shape.

The menu also orchestrates the meal. When people dine in a group, they invariably order their dishes in implicit coordination with one another so that everyone orders the same combination and sequence of courses and eats in a more or less coordinated manner in order to avoid the awkward situation of some eating while others are not. Indeed, knowing how to order in such a situation is very much part of the "civilizing process" (Elias [1939] 1994). Proper table manners begin not with the arrival of the first dish but with the act of ordering the meal.

The menu, choice, and "liberality"

Being able to choose one's own dishes and compose one's own meal is one of the most important features and attractions of the menu. And this "choice," though seemingly banal, is laden with ideological significance. It seems that this spirit of free choice based on a large number of possible dishes reached its zenith already in the nineteenth century in the United States of America, true to its image of the "land of the plentiful" (see Freedman 2011; Haley 2012). However, such boastful display of "liberality" sometimes drew amused comments and sharp criticisms. Below are some examples (italics added by this author for emphasis).

The first comes from a British visitor to the United States in the late nineteenth century:

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5.   See Kaufman (2002) for a historical account of how the modern form of sequenced serving of courses was introduced (called *service à la russe*).

> I shall never forget my feelings when a waiter bluntly placed before me for the first time *a list of the food provided for breakfast—I cannot call it a menu*—at one of the great hotels in New York, and asked what I would take. Being of an experimental turn of mind, *and doubting, moreover, whether all these various dishes could exist any where but in the "catalogue,"* I used to amuse myself by testing the capabilities of the kitchen, but it never failed. (Cited in Hawkins and Fanning 1893: 206)

US General Rush Christopher Hawkins, in the same period, reports on ordering from the menu as follows:

> To arrive at the third objective point involved a rest for one night at the most populous and popular resort in our whole country. For that purpose we selected the most "swell" and "quiet" hotel of the place, where the late dinner and breakfast proved to be quite the worst, as to quality, of the whole season. *The dinner menu must have contained about one hundred and ten items, and the one for breakfast at least seventy-five.* We were tempted to taste a certain "fancy dish," entree in other words, which purported to have been made of capon and truffles. It proved to be a sort of a cold pressed hash of veal and beef tongue, with not a particle of capon or even chicken in it, while the truffles were a composition of a shining black substance of the texture of isinglass. . . .
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> The general aim seems to be to hoodwink patrons with *a show of great liberality—hence the dinner bill of fare with from eighty to one hundred and twenty-five items upon it, and the breakfast menu with from forty to seventy-five.* Such a *spread of printer's ink* looks large, panders to national vanity and convinces the native that he is not being swindled. . . .
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> It is quite unnecessary to write that *not one in ten of those products of the kitchen named in the bill of fare are properly prepared or decently served.* The vegetables are usually cold and soggy, often slopped with a nasty-looking and worse-tasting sauce; the joints are usually tough and cold; *the flesh made dishes [entries], with high sounding French names, neither taste nor smell like anything we have ever seen before*; the sweets are often the better part of the dinner; but the fruits, in the majority of instances, are the cheapest and poorest that can be found. . . . When asked why the hotels in America do not adopt *the Continental* table d'hote *dinner*, the answer always is: *"Americans won't have it that way; they want more liberality."* . . .
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> The American landlord applies the enforced theory of Colonel Sellers to the everyday actualities of hotel keeping. He has convinced himself that his guests do not need really palatable food; they only want the illusion, i.e., *to see a certain liberal display of items with high-sounding names on the bill of fare, and dishes filled with some sort of a beyond-understanding substance, to correspond with a certain name, which can be supplied when ordered.* No matter whether or not it is actual food fit to eat, *it represents an item printed, and fulfils one part of the contract existing between the landlord and the guest.* (Hawkins and Fanning 1893: 198, 200, 201)

It seems reasonable that when the "liberality" of ostentatious menu display is not matched by cooking of reasonable quality, the restaurants should draw ridicule. And it should not surprise us that the menu increasingly resembled a "catalogue" (as derided in the above quotes) as the shopping catalogue itself was just becoming

fashionable amidst the booming shopping paradise in late-nineteenth-century urban Europe and the United States. Nevertheless, the display of plenitude and the existence of real choice underlie the modern institution of the restaurant menu. As Hawkins pointed out in the above passage, the menu is like a contract between the restaurant and the diner. Once the diner walks into the restaurant, the restaurant has to, in theory at least, abide by what the menu promises. And once the diner has placed the order, the kitchen is supposed to deliver the dishes ordered. Of course, sometimes the kitchen runs out of certain ingredients and therefore the chefs can't produce certain dishes, but this kind of situation should not happen too often or to too many dishes or else the menu would become a travesty. I will discuss the "high-sounding French names" of dishes below.

One interesting episode in the 2010 film *Never Let Me Go* (based on a novel of the same title by Kazuo Ishiguro) is very revealing of not only the necessity of learning how to order from a menu but more importantly the connection between the ability to freely choose one's dishes and one's ontological status and fate. The three protagonists, Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy, have grown up in a boarding school called Hailsham. All Hailsham students are clones whose destiny is to donate their organs until they eventually "complete," that is, die, despite rumors of being able to apply to opt out of the compulsory organ donor scheme. School life is very regimented and food is always served collectively, with everyone receiving the same meals. When Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy become teenagers they are transferred to a farm, still living a collective and quite regimented life. One day the threesome are brought to a restaurant. When they are presented with the menu, not knowing how to order, they all panic. To get out of the awkward and embarrassing situation, they all follow their more senior and experienced housemate and quickly order the same dish. Same dish, same destiny.

From menu to order to dishes to check: The menu as a translocutional/transinscriptional technology

The notions of translation and cultural translation interest me the most in their ability to evoke a family of senses relating to words such as transfer, traversal, transit, transfusion, transaction, transliteration, transmutation, transport, transpose, transcript, trajectory, trespassing, and so on. All these words of course suggest a gap between two points (mostly on a spatial plane), the bridging of this gap somehow, a sense of directionality in this bridging via the movement of objects (be they physical objects or concepts, etc.), and a sense of transformation in the process of this bridging. In studies of translations between languages or cultural translations between "cultures," the spatial (real or metaphorical) gap and its bridging are usually emphasized. But it seems that the temporal dimension of linguistic and cultural translation has not received adequate attention. By temporal dimension I mean the mechanisms and processes of *sustained* articulation traversing the gap(s) between two or more "iterative/inscriptional stations" ("stations" since there is never any "terminal" or "final destination" for these continuous traversals), which are in turn defined as relatively stable (or momentarily "frozen" or "congealed") synchronic configurations of a collection of thus-traversed objects (physical or conceptual). If such a temporal

focus of translation were something new, I believe it would have very interesting implications for our understanding of all kinds of translations (translingual, intralingual, transmodal, transcultural, etc.). I will use the rest of this article to illustrate this approach with sociocognitive practices surrounding the restaurant menu.

Let us first trace the trajectory of the multiple forms of iteration and inscription that the dishes on the menu traverse:

- ideas of dishes in the chef's head (including consultation of other restaurants' menus and deciding which would be the chef's so-called "signature dishes" [note the inscriptional metaphor]) →
- draft menu (called "menu planning")[6] →
- finalized menu →
- designing the menu (i.e., how it will look on the dining table [paper? with lamination? cardboard? with or without pictures? which typeface? etc.]) →
- printed menu (on the dining tables as well as outside the main entrance or stuck against the glass door) →
- the construction of the daily "today's specials" or "plats du jour" as an addition to the regular menu (to evoke the availability of freshly acquired ingredients or to suggest that there will always be something new at this restaurant) →
- diners' reading of the menu →
- diners' asking for the waiter's recommendations or explanations of various dishes →
- the waiter's recommending some dishes and explaining some others (e.g., difficult dishes such as "canard étouffé" or "Buddha jumps over the wall") →
- diners' selections of dishes (verbalized) →
- the waiter's jotting down of the orders (usually in some kind of shorthand) →
- the waiter's relaying of the order to the kitchen (e.g., by pinning the order onto a board in front of the chef) →
- the production of the actual dishes by the chef and his/her assistants (again often involving the verbalization of the names of the dishes) →
- the delivery of the dishes to the table (often accompanied by the waiter's shouting out the dishes' names to identify the right diners) →
- the diners consuming the dishes (the sequence from delivery of the dish to eating it repeated according to the number of dishes ordered) →
- the waiter's bringing the check (with the names of the dishes inscribed, now as a computer printout rather than handwritten like the order) →
- the diners' paying for the meal (the whole process repeated dozens of times depending on the total number of groups of diners) →
- foodie bloggers or food critics' writing-up of their dining experience with the dishes and the restaurant, and so on.[7]

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6. There are in fact specialized companies that help restaurants and restaurant chains with menu design (in senses broader than the one relating only to appearance). See, for example, the company called Menuology (http://www.menuology.com/).

7. I thank one of the Paris Fyssen workshop participants for alluding to "stations of the cross" in connection to "iterative/inscriptional stations." For both kinds of stations, the temporal dimension is crucial.

A great many instances of iteration and inscription take place during the course of such a menu-facilitated "culinary enactment," not to mention the many social agents and "agents of iteration/inscription" involved. We can also see the multiple and intimate relationships *between orality and writing*. These verbal and inscriptional relays are acts of translation (intralinguistic, interlinguistic, and intersemiotic), not across different languages but across/between different "iterative/inscriptional stations" with a strong overarching forward temporal drive. Spatial gaps are traversed as well (from dinner table to kitchen, from kitchen to dinner table, etc.), but it is the temporal forward motion that best characterizes the overall "menu-logic." In the next few sections I will examine a little more closely three of the key translocutional/transinscriptional processes mentioned above and how they exemplify important theoretical concepts: (1) menu planning; (2) ordering from the menu; and (3) the writing of the waiter's order slip.

Menu planning

As can be seen in the above-mentioned schematic flow chart, constructing the menu for a particular restaurant is a complex process. The owner might have a vision for his restaurant, and this vision will reflect on what kind of head chef he is looking for (if he is not in fact himself the head chef). But ultimately it is usually the head chef who populates the empty template of the menu with names of dishes that he thinks he and his team in the kitchen can produce. The head chef brings to this menu-planning task an enormous background knowledge, training (from cooking schools, being a chef in previous restaurants), and a repertoire of management and cooking skills. He needs to reconcile the anticipated expectations of the customers with the availability of resources (personnel, ingredients, utensils, etc.), the calculation of cost-effectiveness and profitability (the restaurant has to make money), his own repertoire of dishes, and the identity he wishes to project to the world both for himself as the head chef and for the restaurant. But most importantly, the chef needs to translate the language of his profession (based on, among other things, recipes and professional understandings of culinary practices) into a menu language that the customers can understand and work with. When this process involves rephrasing, simplifying, and glossing in the same language, it is Jakobson's *intralingual translation*. When it involves explicating in a different language (e.g., when an English gloss appears underneath a dish in French or transliterated Chinese or Thai), it is Jakobson's *interlingual translation* (or translation proper).

In his article for this special issue, William Hanks proposes to look at Spanish-colonial translation efforts through five principles or ideals (based on his study on the translation from Spanish into Maya during the colonial period and producing a new language, Maya*, in the process): interpretance, economy, transparency, indexical grounding, and beauty. I suggest that we can look at the chef's construction of the menu through a similar set of five principles:

1. *Interpretance*: any dish in principle can be expressed by a name that is understandable by the customer.

2. *Economy*: the name of the dish should be concise rather than a mouthful; this facilitates not only the learning of the dishes by the customers but the handling of the orders by the waiters as well.

3. *Transparency*: any menu neologism used to convey a culinary concept should have "morphosyntactic elements [that are] clearly distinguishable and relatable to discrete aspects of the target meaning" (Hanks, p. 31, this issue).

4. *Indexical grounding*: "newly minted neologisms [are to be] bound to their canonical referents . . . so that their meaning [is] anchored in the cotextual elements" (Hanks, p. 31, this issue); this is particularly important for so-called "ethnic-fusion" menus, where there are a proliferation of fanciful and playful made-up dish names (the equivalent of neologisms).

5. *Beauty*: dish names on the menu should achieve some kind of formal coherence and consistency (e.g., all dish names should be of a similar length) or even be poetic (many traditional Chinese dishes have poetic and evocative names).

However, to the extent that the chef's professional culinary language is a prestige language, it becomes inevitable that many features of this language will be introduced into the menu to assert superiority, authority, the mark of haute cuisine, and exoticism. The effect of such "difficult" menu language upon prospective customers is often anticipated and results from careful calculation; it should be challenging and thrilling but not overly challenging lest the customers lose face when they find themselves not being able to handle it at all or it necessitates an inordinate amount of intervention and explanation from the waiter, thus interrupting the smooth flow along the "iterative/inscriptional stations."

Culinary subjectification, menu literacy, and menu maneuvers as intersemiotic negotiations

While the head chef and his team of cooks are bringing their professional culinary language to bear upon the menu, each one of the diners is also bringing his or her culinary knowledge and experience into the restaurant. The totality of one's culinary exposure, which is of course constantly shifting (often perceived as "improving" or "expanding"), functions as a powerful force of what might be called "culinary subjectification."[8] In fact, we can paraphrase Mikhail Bakhtin and understand culinary subjectification as a process of *individuals populating the culinary universe with their own intentions*. Below I have included the relevant Bakhtin quote with the language-related words struck out (with a strike-through) and the cuisine-related words added (in square brackets):

> As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot ~~opinion~~ [culinary construct], ~~language~~ [cuisine], for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The ~~word in language~~ [dish in cuisine] is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the ~~speaker~~ [diner] populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the ~~word~~ [dish], adapting it to his own

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8. See Chau (2013) for an elaboration on the concept of "religious subjectification."

semantic [culinary] and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the ~~word~~ [dish] does not exist in a neutral and impersonal ~~language~~ [culinary world] (it is not, after all, out of a ~~dictionary~~ [cookbook] that the speaker gets his ~~words~~ [dishes]!) but rather it exists ~~in other people's mouths~~ [in other people's kitchens, on other people's tables], in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the ~~word~~ [dish], and make it one's own. (Bakhtin 1981: 293–94)

Going to restaurants is for many one of the most crucial sites where one's culinary subjectivity is formed (in addition to one's family cooking traditions, watching cooking shows on TV, reading cook books and restaurant reviews, etc.). One acquires one's own repertoire of culinary expertise, skills in "composing" an excellent meal in a carefully chosen restaurant, and, better still, a more-than-casual acquaintance with the chef (so that he comes out of the kitchen and sits down at one's table for a chat).

At the base of one's culinary subjectivity is menu literacy (see Rice 2011[9]), which is much more than just the ability to understand the individual words on the menu. One should not underestimate the cognitive skills and the learning process involved in ordering dishes from a restaurant menu. First of all, one needs to be quite literate (and know culinary French in the case of more "pretentious" restaurants) in order to feel at ease ordering food in a restaurant. In his entertaining memoir-cum-restaurant-history *Growing in restaurants*, the publisher James Pembroke relates how exhilarated and empowered he felt when he realized that he knew much better than his posher classmates how to order from the menu—he "grew up in restaurants" thanks to the fact that his mother hated cooking and his parents managed to claim all their family expenses, restaurant meals and the children's school fees included, as business expenses (with perhaps a certain degree of exaggeration):

> Until my fifteenth birthday, when my parents took three friends and me out for dinner, I had no idea that my precocious menu knowledge was unusual for someone of my age. My three mates were from posher backgrounds than my own, but their parents had not managed to have their prep school fees tax deductible, so their menu knowledge was kindergarten standard. They had only ever eaten out in hotels on special occasions or at a Wimpy for a treat. *All seventies menus were still in French* due to a subservience to the Master Race of the Kitchen and the belief that the language of Shakespeare lacked the sophistication of the French, who gave us words like serviette, dessert and toilet. *So, I translated virtually every line for them: crêpes Florentine, boeuf bourguignon, etc.* It was the first time I realised I had been spoilt. And, God, did I rejoice in it. (Pembroke 2013: 8, italics added for emphasis)

Among anthropologists, it was of course Jack Goody (1977, 1986, 1987) who first examined the broader sociocognitive impact of writing and literacy in a systematic manner. In his study on the corpus of writing by Ansumana Sonie, a man of the Vai people in West Africa, Goody suggests the interesting concept of

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9.   I am grateful to Jeff Rice for kindly sending me a copy of his essay on menu literacy.

"grapho-linguistic ability" in characterizing this man's literacy and ability to produce certain kinds of writing (e.g., membership lists, membership due payment lists, organizational regulations, etc.). He notes that Sonie had been a cook before becoming the chairman of his Muslim brotherhood organization, and it was his role as a cook that gave him the opportunity to acquire basic literacy such as making a grocery list.

Grapho-linguistic ability (or call it menu literacy) is certainly required of all diners ordering food from the menu (if they do not want to embarrass themselves by pointing to a neighboring table and saying, "I will have what she is having"). Indeed, the menu congeals a highly specialized vocabulary and has many unusual formal qualities, all of which takes some effort to get familiarized with and to master.[10]

Being menu-literate or restaurant savvy also means that one has to master the structure of the menu in relation to the structure of the meal (see Douglas [1972] 1999). Typically, children or people unfamiliar with dining out are (cognitively) overwhelmed by the amount of choices in each section of the menu. This is one of the reasons why some restaurants have a "children's menu," often accompanied by pictures of the actual dishes, as much to provide smaller portions as to delimit the number of choices and degree of complexity/sophistication for these culinary "savages."[11] One may also spend too much time pondering the menu, order either too little or too much, or be overly subversive with one's orders (e.g., ordering chicken salad but *sans* chicken). In other words, ordering from the menu calls for not only cognitive skills but social skills as well (or let's call them "sociocognitive skills").

The overall ensemble of sociocognitive practices around the menu can be called "menu maneuvers," which includes menu planning, menu reading, and ordering from the menu involving interactions with the waiter—these potentially complex interactions are the major site at which the culinary worlds (and languages) of the chefs and the customers collide with, construct, and transform, one another. These practices are in fact complex intersemiotic negotiations and translations, resulting in the constant transformation of the culinary universes of both the chefs and the customers. One may go as far as to say that the menu and all its associated sociocognitive practices (i.e., the "menu maneuvers") interpellate and *produce* the chefs, the waiters, as well as the diners. And we haven't even discussed the diners' (and of course also the cooks' and the waiters') "memories of past dishes" (a nod to Proust) (also complexly inscribed and constantly undergoing processes of translation).

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10. One of the funniest scenes in cinema history concerns a lowly Japanese company employee who puts his stuffy bosses to shame by demonstrating his menu literacy at a fancy French restaurant where the menu is entirely in French. The film is *Tampopo*, a slapstick food-related comedy directed by Juzo Itami (released in 1985). The restaurant scene can be viewed on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRVLqUpHDJE (in Japanese with English subtitles).

11. In fact, for the longest time, restaurants were the exclusive domain of adults. So-called "family-friendly" restaurants were a quite recent twentieth-century invention.

In search of the culinary Other and doing without the menu

The formal standardization of the menu as a genre of text and the menu maneuvers as an ensemble of sociocognitive practices also encourage more adventurous diners to venture out of their comfort zone (though still armed with the reassurance of the familiar formal qualities of the menu, as a sort of Latourian "immutable mobile" [Latour 1986]) to seek the thrills of the exotic culinary Other.

When people venture into culinarily unfamiliar territories, such as so-called "ethnic" restaurants (I heuristically include French and Italian restaurants in this category), they frequently encounter challenges of a "grapho-linguistic" nature. In fact, one may even say that many bourgeois diners deliberately seek out these grapho-linguistic challenges for the thrill of *grapho-culinary* adventure. In these situations, intralinguistic and translinguistic translations occur to an intense degree, and the waiter's status is elevated to that of a Cuna shaman! But here it is not a difficult birth that the shaman is trying to ease or cure (see Lévi-Strauss [1958] 1963) but potentially interrupted iterative/transcriptional production. If the waiter can't satisfactorily "channel" "canard étouffé" or "General Tso's Chicken," we might have a problem, that is, an interrupted coproduction of the meal. This is why I believe the menu is also "iconographic" (and is therefore a "chimera-object") in the sense Carlo Severi proposes in the context of highlighting the importance of nonwritten but graphic modes of representation in their capacity to ground memories and enact narratives (Severi [2007] forthcoming).

Occasionally, however, the grapho-linguistic challenge proves too much to bear for the culinary adventurer and voyeur. Calvin Trillin, an American writer and frequent contributor to *The New Yorker*, relates his discomfort (to put it mildly) when confronted with Chinese menus scribbled on restaurant walls intended only for those who can read Chinese: "The walls were covered with signs in Chinese writing—signs whose Chinatown equivalents drive me mad, since they feed my suspicion that Chinese customers are getting succulent dishes I don't even know about" (2004: 111–12, cited in Rice 2011: 123). But perhaps it is precisely this grapholinguistic and culinary handicap (and hence challenge) that is drawing Trillin and other culinary thrill-seekers back again and again to these maddening Chinese, and other ethnic, restaurants.[12]

Some other culinary adventures take the form of completely abandoning oneself to culinary chance encounters and doing without the menu (thus sociocognitively returning oneself to a state of [culinary] infancy). The ethnomusicologist Steve Jones, who plays the violin in an early-music orchestral ensemble, relates (via a private email communication) the competitive bravado resulting from these culinary adventures:

> In the world of orchestral tours we have a kind of dream, an ideal, a spiel. As we split into various groups to look for a good restaurant, on our return we try to outdo the others with our report. It begins "Lovely little

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12. To help the linguistically perplexed and to heighten their culinary and grapho-linguistic joy, the University of Chicago linguist James D. McCawley even wrote *The eater's guide to Chinese characters* (1984), replete with specimen menus from various kinds of restaurants. I thank one of the reviewers for bringing this book to my attention.

family-run place, very cheap, home-made wine . . . ” and in its extreme
form will involve “no sign outside at all, looks like a hovel,” and “no
menu, the cook just gave us what they were having,” “old lady treading
the grapes as we ate,” “they wouldn’t take any money,” “they invited us
to their daughter’s wedding tomorrow, there are gonna be three family
bands of launeddas players,” etc., etc.

As if to reassure me that these “(no-)menu stories” are not fantasies, Steve finished
off his message to me with his own personal experience: “I did find a great restau-
rant in Rome once with no sign outside. In the hills near Verona I had an amazing
lunch where the cook did indeed just tell us what he would be bringing us.”

Similarly, diners in certain nouvelle-cuisine restaurants would also not have any
menus, surrendering instead to the whims and expertise of the chef:

> These [dining] experiences induce a state of surrender. We cannot validate
> the existence of anything but the stream of improbable perceptions.
> Judgment is inoperative, as it has nothing to rely on. In such trance-like
> states, we are held, led, entrusting our experience to the chef’s expertise.
> That is why, I believe, some avant-garde restaurants (such as El Bulli)
> do not have any menus for us to choose from. That is also why we are
> sometimes instructed, like children being taught for the first time, how to
> eat our food. We succumb to the experience of being a newborn again, able
> to see only blurred spots and shades. We never know what this food is or
> where it came from. We just sit there, helpless and trustful as babes in arms,
> waiting for the impressions to flow through our senses. (Dudek 2008: 54)

Living in a world with a seemingly excessive degree of culinary “free choice” and
“menu liberality,” not exercising choice, and thus temporarily excusing oneself
from the interpellation of the menu and its related sociocognitive practices, be-
comes strangely liberating.[13]

The waiter’s order slip as “text act” and “potency tender”

One of the most curious and significant steps along the many menu-related it-
erative/transcriptive stations is how the waiter’s order slip, when brought from the
diners’ table to the kitchen, will eventually yield the actual dishes. Clearly it is a case
of Jakobson’s intersemiotic translation, or what Severi (this issue) calls “transmuta-
tion proper,” where translation takes place between and across entirely different
existential modes. I have mentioned that the menu can be understood as a contract
between the chef/restaurant and the diner; the restaurant has to honor the spread

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13. One of the reviewers also relates his/her experience of some restaurants deliberately
not working with the printed menu: “In many trendy restaurants I’ve been to of late,
waiters make a big deal about orally performing the menu, both during the moment of
ordering (especially reciting elaborate daily specials that are not written on the menu)
and again when the dish is brought out, reviewing all the exotic ingredients brought
together on the plate. Indeed, it is often disruptive of conversation around the dinner
table.” This practice obviously adds more dimensions to the orality–written iterative/
transcriptive relays.

of choices promised in the menu. On the part of the diners, they also have to honor the choices they have made after they have composed their meals; they cannot change their mind once the order has been placed. What's more, they must pay for the choices they have made![14]

Inspired by speech-act theories (see Austin 1962), I propose to understand the menu as a "text act" (see Chau 2006: 92–98; 2008). A text act is an instance of writing that exerts its power more through its form (e.g., size, materiality, legibility, etc.) and performative context (e.g., placement, the source of enunciation, felicitous conditions, etc.) than through its referential meaning. Classic examples of text acts include Daoist talismans (with magical writing that is intended for the deities rather than humans), Maoist revolutionary slogan murals (usually immense in size), Qur'anic inscriptions around mosques (rarely for one to read), and so on. The "audience" (not so much readers) of these text acts are supposed to feel their power and act accordingly (e.g. to submit in awe, to respond with fervor, etc.). The fancier the restaurant, the more text-act qualities the menu takes on. Far from being simply a list of dishes, an haute-cuisine restaurant menu (together with the décor, the uniformed wait staff, and the often unusually long wine list, etc.) performs as an instrument of intimidation and culinary subjugation.

The waiter's order slip, inscribed with the dishes chosen by the diner, is a particular kind of text act, which is very similar in nature to the Daoist talisman in Chinese religious culture. Simply put, Daoist talismans (usually pieces of paper inscribed with magical signs by a Daoist priest) are symbolic weapons employed in magical actions commanding or combating invisible forces such as deities or demons.[15] As opposed to the most common form of symbolic weapon found in almost all cultures, that is, incantations and curses, talismans are unique in their combination of material presence (e.g., paper, ink), visual representational form (the talismanic form), and the message contained in the talisman (e.g., "Demons

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14. Numeracy is indeed an important skill in the act of ordering dishes in a restaurant, as the diner is not simply ordering dishes that he or she likes but also mentally calculating if he or she can afford the eventual total cost of the meal thus composed.

15. Implicit in the use of talismans is a particular view on the sources of danger or misfortune. Unlike many societies where misfortune is perceived as originating from human agents (e.g., sorcerers), the Daoist talismanic world assumes an innocent human world and an unseen world full of evil spirits and baleful forces, and that humans are constantly in need of divine assistance to ward off evil spirits and noxious miasmas. Daoist priests are specialists whose training has endowed them with the ability to command divine help in expelling evil forces. And the talismans are their weapon of choice. Most importantly, people have come to *recognize* the power of the talismans as efficacious. Talismans come in a wide variety of forms and materials, but the most common form is some combination of graphic elements and writing written in red (vermillion) ink on one side of a thin piece of rectangular-shaped yellow paper. The dimensions vary widely as well, though usually talismans are about one foot in length and four or five inches in width. Talismans have a long history in the Daoist tradition. There are over three thousand basic talismans that have been preserved in the Daoist Canon (Daozang), an authoritative collection of Daoist scriptures and manuals. The use of talismans is still very popular in contemporary Chinese societies (mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world).

be quelled!").[16] Talismans are often characterized as being tallies, whereby two halves of something are brought together to affirm authority. The etymology of the character *fu* (符) for talisman is indeed tallies. Yet the most common forms of talismans do not work as tallies at all; rather, they are more like a "potency tender" (the symbolic equivalent of legal tender, e.g., a money note) to effect some kind of divine interference in human affairs. To the extent that the waiter's order slip can magically command the cooks to yield the dishes ordered by the customers, it, too, is a potency tender.

Conclusions: Translocutional/transinscriptional processes

Traditionally, anthropology tended to emphasize the spoken and orality, and treated texts mostly as dormant documents (or at best as "text-artifacts" that are mostly transcriptions and reproductions/recreations of once oral utterances; see Silverstein and Urban 1996), because most anthropologists studied nonliterate societies. In these societies, where the introduction of writing was recent and literacy not widespread, religious and political authorities were still most often anchored and expressed through oratory and the mastery of forms of utterance. In anthropology, the emphasis on orality is closely linked to the disciplinary desire to directly represent the natives' voices. Verbal utterances denote immediacy, and verbatim transcriptions of verbal utterances denote faithfulness to the original. The highly sophisticated subdiscipline of linguistic anthropology deals with the oral almost exclusively (as evidenced, for example, by articles in linguistic anthropology journals). Because of its capacity to call forth multiple waves of iteration and inscription along "iterative/inscriptional stations," the menu allows us to think more critically and creatively about the relationship between orality and the written, and how the written (i.e., inscriptions) can be incorporated more prominently into studies on linguistic and cultural translation (see, e.g., Hanks 2010 and this issue).

More than merely a piece of paper (or cardboard), the menu is at once a *parole* (though the broader menu universe carries *langue* qualities), a cultural logic (or menu-logic?), a sociocognitive tool, a generative and structuring principle, a narrative, an organizational device (conceptual, taxonomic, as well as social), a civilizing

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16. There are many parallels between Chinese talisman practices and Islamic and other "magical" practices, especially in the mixed use of incantation and writing. The anthropologist Michael Lambek describes Mayotte sorcery technique:

> You tell the spirit what you want done and you give it a gift of food. If it accepts the food, then you know it will do your bidding. You write your name, the name of the person to be attacked, and the *wafaku* (a spell in a grid diagram that indicates how you want the victim to be affected) on a piece of paper. Then you fold the paper and put it around the neck of a chicken like a *hiriz* (amulet), whispering over and over again the name of the person you wish to harm. You slaughter the chicken, drenching the *sairy* and the written message in its blood. The spirit comes to eat the blood, reads the message, and immediately rushes off in search of the victim. (Lambek 1993: 243–44)

machine, a conduit of (culinary) governmentality,[17] an ideological vehicle (e.g., about choice, freedom, taste, culturedness, civility, cosmopolitanism, social class, etc.), an ideological state apparatus in the Althusserian sense, a textographic fetish or text act (Chau 2006, 2008), and so on. Each menu is a cosmo-menu (which is why in order to explain the menu to our imaginary premenu, prerestaurant tribal natives, we have to explain our whole world). But above all, and more specific to the theme of this *Hau* special issue on "translating worlds," the menu is one of many "iterative/inscriptional stations" in the ensemble of acts of translation, or, more precisely, translocution and transinscription.

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17. See Coveney, Begley, and Gallegos (2012) for a discussion on "savoir fare" (i.e., food savvy) as a form of governmentality.

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Subjectivation culinaire : Le monde traduit des menus et des commandes

Résumé : L'idée de cet article est issue d'une série de questions innocentes : Comment peut-on traduire le mot «menu» (c'est à dire, le menu d'un restaurant) dans la langue maternelle d'individus sans aucune expérience de ce qu'est un restaurant ou un menu? Et comment faudrait-il s'y prendre pour leur expliquer comment commander à partir du menu ? Il est rapidement devenu clair que la traduction du mot «menu» implique non seulement la traduction d'un certain monde contenant l'habitude d'aller au restaurant et de commander à la carte, mais aussi celle de notre monde social et conceptuel lui-même (c'est à dire, idéal-typiquement occidental) ; ce qui revient à dire que cette simple liste de plats présentée sur une feuille est elle-même conçue par le monde dans lequel on la trouve et contribue significativement en retour à la fabrication de ce monde. Dans cet article, j'examine le menu du restaurant comme une technologie trans-locutionnelle et trans-inscriptionnelle de fabrication du monde social (le menu comme une logique et cosmo-menu). En tant qu'acte de texte situé à l'une des nombreuses «stations itératives /inscriptionnelles" le long d'une chaîne de trans-locutions et de trans-inscriptions indéterminée et continue, le menu met en évidence la dimension *temporelle* de toutes sortes de traductions (translinguale, intralinguale, transmodale, transculturelle, etc).

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