

# Culturemes in an Italian-English Bilingual Food Blog during COVID-19

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**Abstract.** This paper presents a parallel corpus study of culturemes in the Italian and English versions of the food blog *Juls' Kitchen – Stories and Recipes from Tuscany* during COVID-19 total lockdown in Italy (9 March-18 May 2020) to ascertain how some culturemes may have shifted due to lifestyle changes originating from COVID-19 measures. Three categories of culturemes are analyzed: time-related, food-related and lockdown-related. The results show that lifestyle changes have affected not only the practice and narration of cooking but also such fundamental tenets of culture as time, in different ways in the Italian and English version of the blog.

**Keywords:** culturemes, food blogging, COVID-19, corpus-assisted discourse analysis, parallel corpora, Italy.

## 1. Introduction

Personal blogs are one of the most enduring genres<sup>1</sup> of computer-mediated communication (henceforth, CMC: Yus 2011), although they have changed significantly since they first became popular in the 1990s (Blood 2002). Ever since the advent of Web 2.0, blogs have been increasingly hybridized (Herring et al. 2005; Diemer and Frobenius 2013; Cesiri 2016a), not only due to the emergence of social media but also because of the evolution of the blog itself as a genre into the video log or vlog (Frobenius 2014), which has made it possible for what used to be known as *personal logs*, with a clear antecedent in personal diaries, to be actually based on multimedia platforms.

In comparison with the past, therefore, the contemporary blog is an ever increasingly multimodal CMC genre, and it is not only or predominantly a tool for self-disclosure (Ligorio and Barzanò 2018), personal expression and online socialization (Bronstein 2013) but also, and perhaps most significantly, a sophisticated Internet-based platform designed to market the blogger's own products, whether tangible, like items sold on corporate blogs (Bondi and Diani 2015), or intangible, like the experience of local and traditional food.

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars reject the notion of the blog as a genre, on account of its hybridity, by stressing the risk of confusing the medium with the genre (Primo et al. 2013, 341). To settle this issue and to account for the differences between personal, corporate and special interest blogs, Garzone (2017, 45) has suggested that blogs be considered a "macrogenre." In a similar way, Hadžiahmetović Jurida (2013, 533-534), in the wake of Baron (2008), views blogging as a genre colony whose members all share a set of features of Netspeak (Crystal 2006). In this paper, we rely on the classic notion of the blog as a CMC genre, as applied by Herring (1996) and in the vast literature that has developed in the wake of her work.

In this paper, we present a corpus study of a bilingual food blog, *Juls' Kitchen – Stories and Recipes from Tuscany*,<sup>1</sup> maintained in Italian and English by Giulia Scarpaleggia, a food writer, photographer and teacher of Tuscan cooking. The blogger is a food professional, with an academic background in communication sciences,<sup>2</sup> and runs *Juls' Kitchen* as a family business, together with her husband, Tommaso Galli. This study is part of a larger project on multilingual food blogging as a vehicle of intercultural communication (Fusari 2021), where local food traditions and recipes are often an occasion to promote the blogger's national heritage, and blogs are bilingual, or sometimes multilingual, to engage readers worldwide in a storytelling that will facilitate the understanding of the blogger's own country, nation and culture(s).

Although analyzing elements of culture in language, with corpus or other methods, is known to be rife with methodological and conceptual obstacles (Schneider 2018), the notion of cultureme adopted in this study has proved to be useful and quite easily applied to corpora. Culturemes are lexical references, also sometimes referred to as homophoric (Halliday and Hasan 1976, 71), which are defined and applied slightly differently depending on the area of research in which they are used. For instance, socio-cultural studies understand culturemes more widely as “abstract entities that allow for the classification of social interaction (their empirical equivalents being behaviouremes) and whose correspondent words are typically associated with nonverbal signals, such as gestures, interpersonal proximity and distance, acquired social roles, age, gender and other” (Nagórko 2004, 134; our translation). Translation and language studies tend to adopt a somewhat narrower view of culturemes as “elements that carry cultural information: the smallest unit that carries this kind of information” (Cuciuc 2011, 139; our translation). In this paper, we espouse Faber and Vidal Claramonte's (2017) view of culturemes as “semplates,”

a blend of semantic and template [...] a cultural frame or linguistic pattern imposed on the environment to create, coordinate, subcategorize, or contrast natural categories. It is a kind of semantic pattern that facilitates concept clustering in a frame-like representation [...] The meaning of bread and rice dishes thus goes beyond their composition (ingredients) and includes factors such as location, time, preparation, eating event, historical and geographical context, etc. A semplate can lead to a deeper understanding of culture-specific objects and their relatedness (Faber and Vidal Claramonte 2017, 158).

In fact, corpus queries performed on the Italian and English version of this blog demonstrate, as we see below, that lexical items expressing culturemes are not strictly speaking untranslatable, but they are typically associated with different phraseologies in different languages, precisely because they rely on different cultural background assumptions. Therefore, they are not *impossible* to translate, but their translation occurs, at least in this specific blog, within a different context and co-text in the Italian and English version, to accommodate the food and world knowledge that the blogger expects her Italian and international followers to have.

<sup>1</sup> The blog is available at: <https://en.julskitchen.com/blog>.

<sup>2</sup> Information available from the blog media kit: <https://en.julskitchen.com/media-kit> (retrieved on 24 February 2022).

## 2. Methodology

*Juls' Kitchen* has been running since 2009, and it now has a following of about 100,000 users, especially from Italy, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and North Europe.<sup>1</sup> It is also present on most social media (Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram), and has its own channels on YouTube and Spotify. In addition to these external platforms, *Juls' Kitchen* has also moved its Tuscan cooking classes, previously held in the blogger's own family home in Colle di Val d'Elsa, in the province of Siena, to the e-learning platform Udemy, to be able to keep the business going even amid the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of writing, on-site classes have started again, while those online on Udemy remain available as an alternative. The blog's international reach is further demonstrated by the fact that it was awarded the Best Food Culture Editor's Choice Award in the 2019 Saveur Blog Awards held in Cincinnati, as well as by the interaction with users on the blog itself, and especially on its associated social media, occurring mostly in English as a Lingua Franca (henceforth, ELF). Besides working with several Italian food companies and magazines, *Juls' Kitchen* has also featured in the British magazines *The Simple Things* and *The Foodie Bugle*.

*Juls' Kitchen* represents a suitable case study for bilingual blogs marketing the intangible (in this case, food) heritage of Italy to an international audience because:

1. it is, to the best of our knowledge, the only Italian blog that is entirely available both in Italian (<https://it.julskitchen.com/>) and in English (<https://en.julskitchen.com/blog>);<sup>2</sup>
2. its main focus is food heritage, especially Tuscan, with as close a focus on recipes as on the narratives that introduce the food and ingredients described in each post;
3. due to the presence of long introductory personal narratives before each recipe, it has been selected as a term of comparison for another study of food heritage and identity that this author is developing as part of the same research project (Fusari 2021).

The fact that food writing generally, and food blogging specifically, are powerful devices to narrate personal experience (McGaughey 2010; Lee, Samdanis and Gkiousoy 2014; Cesiri 2020), and that they also play a role in the branding of tourism destinations (Francesconi 2007; Manca 2013; Peštek and Činjarević 2014; Renko and Bučar 2014; Cesiri 2016b; Bezzola and Lugosi 2018) is already well attested in the literature. In this paper, we set out to answer some more specific research questions about how a dramatic event affecting the whole world,

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<sup>1</sup> Scarpaleggia, personal communication, 2 April 2021.

<sup>2</sup> There is actually a sizable number of Italian-English blogs on the Internet, some also including more languages, but translation is neither systematic (i.e. not all the original Italian pages have a correspondent in English and/or in other languages) nor performed by professional translators. *Juls' Kitchen*, despite some occasional minor inaccuracies, is written in idiomatic standard English.

i.e. the COVID-19 pandemic, has impacted on the presence, role and use of culturemes in food narratives.

As a matter of fact, due to movement restrictions that have often made it impossible for people to travel, some of the most affected blogs have been those that promote tourist destinations directly, or local food traditions, as pre-travel information for an international audience speaking English as a *Lingua Franca* for tourism. Food blogs also sometimes provide a set of associated on-site services, like the Tuscan cooking classes offered by the author of the blog under analysis. These activities have had to be cancelled or moved online during the pandemic, necessitating blogging platforms updates and/or requiring bloggers to resort to extra plugins or external videoconferencing services.

Our main research questions, therefore, are:

1. In the posts written during total lockdown in Italy (9 March-18 May 2020), as well as in more recent COVID-related ones, do this blog's keywords reveal a shift in culturemes, intended not as culture specific, allegedly *untranslatable* words, but as “semplates,” following Faber and Vidal Claramonte's definition provided above?
2. As food writing is a typical example of narrating an experience (Arhendholz et al. 2013, 126), to what extent can this experience “move” online? In other words, based on the data on hand, do food making and food blogging provide a creative substitute for their associated “live” activities, like sharing food, attending cooking classes or going on a “gourmet” holiday?

In order to answer these questions, a considerable section of *Juls' Kitchen* (212 posts) was downloaded and converted into .txt. The largest part (176 posts written between 2016 and 2020) was collected into two electronic corpora, in English (88 texts) and Italian (88 texts) respectively; in addition to these, all the posts (18) that were written during lockdown, or mentioning lockdown, were aligned in a parallel Italian-English corpus (for a total of 36 texts, consisting of Italian originals and their respective translations). Table 1 illustrates the dataset collected for this study.

	<i>Juls' Kitchen</i> —Italian (words)	<i>Juls' Kitchen</i> —English (words)
Reference corpus	162,229	152,975
Parallel corpus	29,782	30,227

Table 1. Corpus size in word tokens.

The posts published before COVID-19 are labelled in Table 1 as “reference corpus” because their role in this study is predominantly to provide a reference to generate keywords in both English and Italian.

Another important difference between the reference and parallel corpora in this study is their assembling method. The reference corpora were bootstrapped from the blog, using the WebBootCaT tool (Baroni et al. 2006) integrated into the

current version of *Sketch Engine* (Kilgarriff et al. 2014). This procedure has a number of advantages in terms of speed, but it requires quite a high degree of manual work to clean up the texts from headers, metadata and other non-textual content that the software tends to bootstrap together with each blog post. The parallel corpus, instead, was assembled by manually downloading all the posts written in the relevant time period (9 March-18 May 2020), in Italian and in English, as well as more recent ones that included the keyword “lockdown” according to the website’s search engine. The parallel corpus was also tagged for foreign borrowings (including, but not limited to Anglicisms in Italian and Italianisms in English), for further research. The resulting 36 files (18 in Italian and 18 in English) were then aligned manually on an Excel spreadsheet, and subsequently uploaded to *Sketch Engine* to compile a parallel corpus. The parallel corpus was aligned sentence by sentence, although sometimes the length of the unit of alignment was adapted to reflect the nature of the target text, which is not translated literally, but sense-for-sense, and partially adapted for an international audience.

As a starting point for the analysis, the Keywords tool was used. First, a general keyword list of both pre-COVID corpora was created, by using the largest and most register-balanced large corpus of Italian available on *Sketch Engine* prior to the COVID pandemic, Italian Web 2016 (*itTenTen16*), and its more recent English counterpart, English Web 2018 (*enTenTen18*), as reference corpora, respectively for Italian and for English. This procedure allowed us to obtain an overview of the keywords used in *Juls’ Kitchen*, and of their respective context of use in the source and target languages, abstracted from the lockdown variable. Secondly, keyword lists were generated by comparing the Italian section of the parallel corpus with the Italian reference corpus, and then doing the same for English. Comparisons were made both at word-phrase level, and at sentence-paragraph level, to identify the behaviour of the main keywords in each corpus, with special attention paid to culturemes.

This methodology can be described as corpus driven (Tognini Bonelli 2001) as, at this stage in the study, no previous hypothesis had been made, and the analyst made her best effort to minimize the researcher bias that may have occurred if she had tested her own feelings and views of lockdown against the data.

### 3. Discussion

In this section, we present, analyze and discuss our corpus data, as stated above, with a corpus driven approach, i.e. starting from the data themselves, and trying to derive hypotheses from them. Our starting point, as is typical of this corpus methodology, are wordlists and, in our specific case, keyword lists extracted by using more general corpora, unrelated with either food or COVID.

#### 3.1. General keywords analysis

Although the texts are in a translation relation to each other, Table 2 shows that the Italian version of the blog (pre-pandemic) prioritizes local lexical items, including a toponym, “Gambassi” (quite rare in *itTenTen16*, at 0.27 per million

words—henceforth, pmw), while the English version contains several Italianisms and names of ingredients that stress the Italianness, or indeed the *Tuscanness* of the food.

Keywords in Italian Reference Corpus	Keywords in English Reference Corpus
1. arista	1. Tuscan
2. Juls	2. pecorino
3. sambuco	3. Tommaso
4. cogue	4. ricotta
5. Gambassi	5. Parmigiano
6. strudel	6. elderflower
7. crespelle	7. artichoke
8. caco	8. butternut
9. finocchietto	9. risotto
10. bomboloni	10. eggplant

Table 2. First ten keywords in *Juls' Kitchen* before lockdown.

The only keyword in common between the two lists is *elderflower (sambuco)*, possibly because the blogger uses this ingredient and mentions it more often than is usually done in Italian (481.13 pmw in *Juls' Kitchen*, as against 1.23 pmw in *itTenTen16*). Elder trees are also comparatively more common in the UK and other English-speaking countries than in Italy (Schmitzer, Veberič and Štampar 2012, 128-130), and this may have balanced out the frequency of this word in *itTenTen16* and *enTenTen18* respectively. Table 3 returns an entirely different picture of the keywords.

Keywords in Italian	Keywords in English
1. Livia	1. pregnancy
2. lockdown	2. Livia
3. gravidanza	3. sauerkraut
4. pescatora	4. Piave
5. necci	5. hospital
6. crauti	6. sundried
7. ospedale	7. nutritious
8. Piave	8. alchermes
9. sformatini	9. marjoram
10. alchermes	10. rucola

Table 3. First ten keywords in *Juls' Kitchen* during lockdown.

The first and most important event that is narrated in this section of the blog is the birth of Livia, as the blogger was pregnant with her first child during lockdown. This may indeed have also affected the types of food described in her blog before and during lockdown: however, besides *nutritious* recipes and *sundried* fresh herbs (*majoram* and *rucola*) suitable for an expectant mother, both corpora also mention salty acidic food (*crauti/sauerkraut*), a traditional cheese (*Piave*), and an ancient Florentine spirit (*alchermes*), which are quite

unlikely to have been part of the blogger's own homecooking during this time period.

The high keyness of the word *lockdown* in the Italian keyword list (2<sup>nd</sup> rank) in comparison with the English one (39<sup>th</sup>) may well be related to its being an Anglicism in Italian, and in fact one that first appears in this blog only over a month into the Italian 2020 lockdown (on 17 April). Prior to that, in line with Italian generally (Pietrini 2021, 16-17), this emergency measure was referred to in *Juls' Kitchen* as *blocco/blocco totale*, as shown in the examples below, taken from the parallel concordance of *lockdown* in English. Both examples come from a blog entry entitled *Rivendicando il mio angolo di libertà. Tagliatelle al pesto di cavolo nero e mandorle*/'Claiming my corner of freedom: home-made tagliatelle with Tuscan kale pesto,' dated 19 March 2020:

(1) Poi la grande paura, la diffusione del Corona Virus nel Nord Italia e dopo pochi giorni l'intero paese in blocco. Ero in uno stato confusionale.

[Then the big fear, the spread of Corona Virus<sup>1</sup> in the North of Italy, and after a few days the whole country in lockdown. This left me in a state of haze].

(2) Ma ho intenzione di lavorare, scrivere, cucinare e fotografare per mantenermi sana di mente, per ricreare una routine creativa in questi giorni di blocco totale, per essere preparata per quello che verrà, una volta che questi tempi assurdi finiranno.

[But I intend to work, write, cook and photograph to keep me sane, to recreate a creative routine in the days of lockdown, to be prepared for what will come, once these absurd times will be over].

This keyword analysis has allowed us to break down the culturemes identified in this blog into three categories: time-related, food-related and lockdown-related.

### 3.2. Time as a cultureme

Where the notion of time emerges more clearly as a crucial element not only for lockdown cooking but also for food culture more generally, is in multiword key terms. In fact, there are no expressions of time in the keyword lists generated from the corpora prior to lockdown, and all multiword key terms are names of ingredients or kitchen tools (e.g. *extra virgin oil*; *cucchiaino di olio*). Conversely, the texts written during lockdown prioritize time spent cooking over cooking ingredients/methods, as shown by the presence in the Italian list of as many as seven chronological expressions (i.e. *tempo totale*, *newsletter mensile*, *ore prima*, *prime sere*, *per la prima volta*, *giorni successivi*, *una volta cotto*) and six in the English one (i.e. *prep time*, *total time*, *cooking process*, *virtual Advent*, *other week*, *difficult time*). Using concordances to explore the context, it emerges that these chronological multiword key terms can be broken down into expressions that refer to time as instrumental to managing the blog and cooking food (*tempo totale*, *newsletter mensile*, *ore prima*, *prime sere*, *per la prima volta*, *una volta*

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<sup>1</sup> The compound "coronavirus" is unusually spelled with two words here because, just like the Anglicism "lockdown," it was not yet lexicalized at this stage in the pandemic (Pietrini 2021, 23-29).

cotto; prep time, cooking time) and to lockdown time (*giorni successivi; virtual Advent; other week; difficult time*): they can thus be considered to be either procedural or experiential views of time.

A comparative view of the notion of time in the parallel corpus can be obtained via the Wordsketch tool (Figures 1 and 2), perhaps the most characteristic and unique feature of *Sketch Engine*, “a summary of a word’s grammatical and collocational behaviour produced automatically” (Kilgarriff and Tugwell 2002, 125). Although Wordsketch is not typically used for comparative purposes across corpora, in our case it proved fundamental in order to explore the behaviour of time-related expressions in a genuinely corpus driven fashion, i.e. one in which “the corpus tells us what the facts are” (Sinclair 2004, 4), instead of making hypotheses and testing them against concordances and collocations.

↔	☰ ☒ ✕	↔	☰ ☒ ✕	↔	☰ ☒ ✕	↔	☰ ☒ ✕	↔	☰ ☒ ✕
verbs with "tempo" as object		verbs with "tempo" as subject		modifiers of "tempo"		prepositional phrases with nouns		"tempo" and/or ...	
<b>richiedere</b> ...	richiede tempo	<b>impiegare</b> ...	tempo impiegherai	<b>totale</b> ...	Tempo totale Porzioni Ingredienti	<b>"tempo" di</b> ...		<b>denaro</b> ...	tempo e denaro
<b>attraversare</b> ...	attraversano il tempo	<b>leggere</b> ...	tempo fa ho letto	<b>libero</b> ...	tempo libero	<b>"tempo" per</b> ...		<b>condimento</b> ...	tempi e sui condimenti
<b>investire</b> ...	investire tempo	<b>finire</b> ...	tempi assurdi finiranno	<b>stesso</b> ...	nello stesso tempo	<b>"tempo" a</b> ...		<b>voglia</b> ...	tempo , voglia
<b>spendere</b> ...	tempo speso			<b>assurdo</b> ...	questi tempi assurdi	<b>"tempo" dell'</b> ...		<b>amicizia</b> ...	tempo , amicizie
<b>tornare</b> ...	tornerà quel tempo			<b>pieno</b> ...	lavoro a tempo pieno	<b>"tempo" della</b> ...		<b>amore</b> ...	tempo , e amore
<b>scandire</b> ...	scandire il tempo			<b>spaventato</b> ...	tempo spaventata			<b>stagione</b> ...	tempo e delle stagioni
<b>volere</b> ...	vuole molto più tempo			<b>necessario</b> ...	tempi necessari			<b>luogo</b> ...	tempo e il luogo
<b>dedicare</b> ...	dedichiamo tempo			<b>strano</b> ...	strano tempo			<b>ricetta</b> ...	tempo , una ricetta
<b>andare</b> ...	tempi andati			<b>bello</b> ...	bei tempi				
<b>considerare</b> ...	considerano i tempi								

Figure 1. Wordsketch of *tempo* in *Juls' Kitchen* during lockdown.



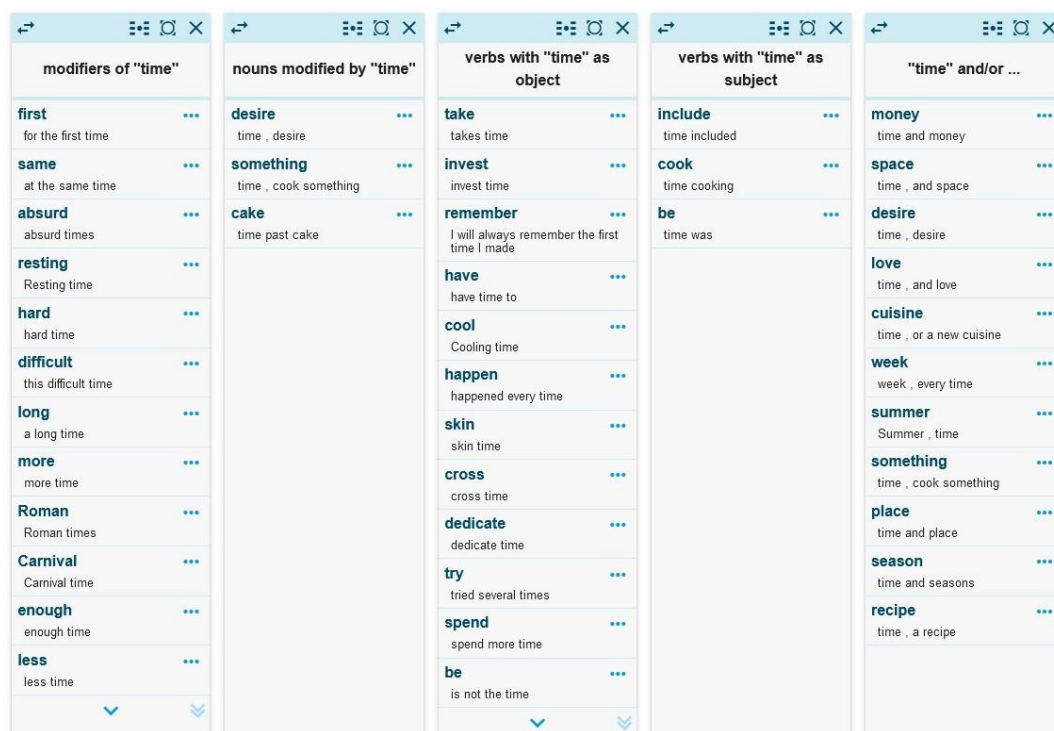


Figure 2. Wordsketch of *time* in *Juls' Kitchen* during lockdown.

In terms of Processes instantiated by verbs that have “time” as their Goal,<sup>1</sup> time is viewed as a fundamental resource not only to cook,

(3) Perché è quando divento la fonte della tua ispirazione, quando ti chiedo di investire tempo e denaro, acquistando gli ingredienti per preparare una ricetta (14 May 2020).

[Because this is when I become the source of your inspiration, when I ask you to invest your time and money, buying the ingredients to make a recipe].

but also to write:

(4) Iniziare un blog richiede *tempo*, creare un pubblico richiede tempo, trovare la propria voce richiede tempo (1 February 2021).

[Starting a blog takes time, creating an audience takes time, finding your voice takes *time*].

This procedural view of time, however, goes hand in hand with the experiential (i.e. lockdown) one, sometimes described euphemistically:

<sup>1</sup>The model of grammar we rely on in this study is the Systemic Functional one expounded in Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). Here, we refer to the System of Transitivity, where Processes are “doing words,” typically realized by verbs, and Goals are Participants that undergo the action, typically realized by noun groups in the position of the traditional direct object of structural models of grammar.

(5) Questo strano tempo di riposo imposto ci ha dato spazio per vivere a pieno la gravidanza (23 July 2020).

[This downtime gave us time, and space, to fully live the pregnancy].

(6) Ho sempre lamentato una mancanza di tempo per lavorare ai nostri progetti personali [...] Ecco, è arrivato il momento. Il momento giusto per scrivere, cucinare, ricercare e esplorare, il momento giusto per scrivere quel libro che ho tenuto troppo a lungo in un cassetto, il momento di fare un passo avanti verso nuove esperienze (19 March 2020).

[I've always lamented a lack of time to develop personal projects, so this can be the time, the *time* to write, cook, research and explore, the time to write the book I've kept in a drawer for too long, the time to take a step towards new experiences].

Sometimes, procedural cooking time and experiential lockdown time merge into one single concept of time, viewed as a resource that used to be scarce and is now, all of a sudden, available in excess:

(7) Il mio primo pensiero, quando, all'inizio di marzo, abbiamo dovuto cambiare la nostra vita quotidiana nel giro di una notte, è stato che finalmente avrei avuto il tempo di fare un inventario del mio congelatore e della mia dispensa (17 April 2020).

[My first thought, when, at the beginning of March, we had to change our daily life in the span of a night, was: well, now I'll have the time to do an inventory of my freezer and my pantry].

(8) Passo forse più tempo a cucinare di quanto non facessi prima, e sì che ci passavo le ore in cucina (23 March 2020).

[Perhaps I spend more time cooking than I did before, if this could even be possible, as, basically, I used to live into my kitchen].

Despite a clear attempt, visible especially in Examples 5-7 above, to adopt a glass-half-full perspective on lockdown, the evaluation of time shows a generally negative Appraisal,<sup>1</sup> as illustrated by the presence of adjectives like “absurd,” “hard,” “challenging” and “difficult.”

The data in Figures 1 and 2 may actually seem to suggest that time spent in lockdown is described more frequently and in more detail in the English translation than in the Italian original. However, a more in-depth inspection of concordances shows that the opposite is true. This emerges particularly from an examination of some excerpts that have not been translated into English or that, vice versa, have been added to the English version with no equivalent in the source text, as we see below.

### 3.3. Food as a cultureme

The parallel corpus contains 102 units of alignment (typically sentences or clauses, as seen above in the methodological section) that have not been translated into English, and one hundred that have been added to the English

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<sup>1</sup> Again, in line with the Systemic Functional Linguistic perspective on grammar and discourse, we rely on Martin and White (2005).

version without a direct equivalent in the Italian source text. Additions and eliminations tend to pertain directly to the expected background food knowledge of Italian and international readers respectively.

(9) Di solito io uso una farina tipo 1 (26 May 2020).

[I usually use the Italian type 1 flour, which roughly corresponds to a stone ground flour].

(10) Le ricette dell'Artusi mi piacciono perché sono sempre sorprendentemente moderne (10 February 2020).

[Artusi is considered the father of the Italian cuisine, you can read it more about this here. I like Artusi's recipes because they are always surprisingly modern].

(11) Di origine nord-europea – il pound è appunto la libbra, intesa come unità di misura – si è diffuso poi in tutto il continente, in America e in altri stati (26 May 2020).

[Originated in the North of Europe, the pound cake spread throughout the continent, in America and in other countries].

(12) Preferisco sempre usare uova biologiche da allevamento all'aperto, quelle che si riconoscono dal codice 0 stampato sul guscio (26 May 2020).

[I always prefer to use organic free range eggs].

Some additions and eliminations, however, do not simply refer to practical aspects of cooking or *realia* (i.e. flour, Pellegrino Artusi's cooking book, units of measurement or types of eggs in Examples 9-12), but rather to the blogger's expectations of the readers' culturally determined taste, cooking habits and feelings elicited by certain ingredients.

(13) Ho mantenuto la bagna all'alchermes, forse per nostalgia, ma tu puoi usare del caffè poco zuccherato o una bagna alcolica (6 April 2020).

[I kept the alchermes soaking syrup, probably out of nostalgia. If you cannot find Alchermes – the Tuscan liqueur made by infusing cinnamon, clove, nutmeg and various other spices, whose uniquely red colour derives from the traditional use of cochineal insects – substitute with another spiced liqueur or coffee].

(14) Fino a qualche anno fa, avrei fatto il mio risotto alla pescatora solo con olio extravergine d'oliva, evitando il burro. E avrei omesso anche il Parmigiano, sia mai che si abbini il pesce col formaggio (3 March 2021).

[Until a few years ago, I would have made my seafood risotto just with extra virgin olive oil, skipping the butter altogether. And I would have left out the Parmigiano, God forbid! Italians are very particular when it comes to pairing fish and cheese, even though there are quite a few exceptions, especially in the South of Italy].

(15) Si deve poter gustare ogni chicco di riso, anche se non è separato come nel pilaff. È la consistenza unica del risotto. Richiede lavoro e attenzione, ma ne vale assolutamente la pena (3 March 2021).

[One must be able to taste each grain of rice although it is not separated as in pilaff. It is a labour of love, but it is totally worth it].

(16) Prendevano una manciata di castagne secche dai grandi sacchi che aspettavano all'ingresso, pronti a diventare farina. Infilavano le castagne in tasca e andavano a scuola. Durante la mattinata sgranocchiavano quelle castagne: quello era il loro spuntino, dolce e nutriente (1 February 2020).

[They would stash the dried chestnuts in their pockets and go to school. That was their morning snack, simple, sweet and nutritious].

In Examples 13-16, the reasons for not mentioning the characteristic texture of rice or dried chestnuts in the English version, or for explaining that Italians do not typically eat fish with cheese, is not their untranslatability, as it is often assumed in translation studies whenever culturemes are discussed, but their “cultural meaning, eating contexts, shared memories, and emotions” (Faber and Vidal Claramonte 2017, 174), which do not coincide for the discourse communities reading the blog either in Italian or in English. This applies specifically to the notion of comfort food expressed in the two versions of the blog.

Items labelled as “comfort food” in Italian	Items labelled as “comfort food” in English
1. frittata	1. baked apples
2. torta salata	2. omelette
3. insalate ricche	3. pie
4. pappa al pomodoro	4. hearty salads
5. minestrone	5. gnocchi alla romana
6. brodo di pollo	6. pappa al pomodoro
	7. minestrone
	8. lasagna
	9. chicken broth

Table 4. “Comfort food” in Italian and English.

Table 4 shows that these culturemes are more numerous in the translated version of the blog, perhaps also because the expression *comfort food* is borrowed from English. A comparison with *enTenTen18* (Figure 3) actually shows that what counts as comfort food in this blog, apart perhaps from soups, dumplings, lasagna and pie, would not be understood as such in an English-speaking context, where high-calorie, carb-rich and/or piping hot dishes seem to prevail.

soup	...
casserole	...
pudding	...
pie	...
meatloaf	...
pasta	...
dumpling	...
cheese	...
potato	...
stew	...
meatball	...
Chili	...
dish	...
lasagna	...
risotto	...

Figure 3. Types of “comfort food” in *enTenTen18*.

It appears clear that what counts as comfort food is culturally mediated (Pinnavaia 2020, 36-38), and also influenced by the socially and psychologically overwhelming experience of home confinement: for example, some significant changes have already been identified in Italian eating habits, specifically as concerns increased consumption of red and processed meat, biscuits, spreadables, and especially baking mixtures for homemade biscuits, bread and pizza (Bracale and Vaccaro 2020, 1425). As we see below, the blogger provides a definition of comfort food (“we tend to consider comforting what we know better”) and explicitly recognizes that it is a resource to adapt her business offer to the challenges of COVID-19 related travel restrictions.

### 3.4. Lockdown as a cultureme

A third category of culturemes, in which many details are omitted from the English translation, are indeed those referring to the frustration of lockdown life, as well as to the coping strategies the blogger and her family have adopted to overcome it.

(17) E per fortuna che poco prima del lockdown mi ero rifornita delle mie farine preferite per panificare, in vista della stagione dei corsi di cucina che avrebbe dovuto iniziare proprio in quel periodo. Questo ci ha garantito pane e pizza ogni settimana (17 April 2020).

[I was lucky as before the lockdown I had stocked the pantry with huge bags of bread flour and whole wheat flour in view of the cooking class season which was due to start soon].

(18) Per lo meno, alla fine di questo periodo difficile, avrò la mia ricetta per la pizza ben collaudata, che sarò felice di usare ogni volta che avremo degli amici a cena. Perché tornerà quel tempo (17 April 2020).

[At least, at the end of this difficult time, I’ll have my recipe for pizza, something I’ll be happy to use whenever we’ll have friends over for dinner].

(19) Questo 2020 ci ha tolto tanto: libertà, persone amate, viaggi, corsi di cucina. A ben guardare, però, ci ha anche dato cose che ricorderemo, che hanno cambiato per sempre la nostra vita in meglio, che ci hanno dato fiducia (30 December 2020).

[This 2020 has taken a lot from us: freedom, loved ones, travels, cooking classes. On a closer look, though, it has given us things that we will remember, that have forever changed our lives for the better].

(20) Il lockdown ci ha sicuramente aiutati a mantenere la gravidanza in una dimensione intima e privata. Praticamente non sono più uscita di casa, tranne che per le visite mediche, gli esami del sangue e le mie passeggiate quotidiane in aperta campagna. Ad oggi devo ancora tornare al supermercato (23 July 2020).

[The lockdown definitely helped in keeping the pregnancy in an intimate and private dimension, as I barely exited the house, except for doctor visits, blood tests and my daily walks in the open countryside].

One possible explanation for downplaying lockdown anguish in the English version of the blog is that most posts were written before total lockdown was implemented in other countries besides China and Italy.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, seen as a “semplate,” total confinement could not yet be considered a “shared experience,” suitable for “the establishment of rapport on the basis of common ground” (Lutzky and Gee 2018, 182), i.e. a viable cultureme to share with an international audience. In translating these posts, the cultural implications of not walking into a supermarket for several months on end, or of doubting whether it will ever again be allowed to invite friends round for dinner, may have been considered by the blogger not to be, at that time, fully understandable by a non-Italian reader.

Especially in the English version of the blog, as seen in the examples above, a sunny-side-up view of life tends to prevail, possibly as a marketing strategy to keep the international audience interested in travelling to Italy to attend Juls’ cooking classes, “once these absurd times will be over” and “we’ll experience a new Renaissance.” Early into the pandemic (4 April 2020), the blog featured a podcast, available only in English, which was prefaced by this quite optimistic outlook:

I think comfort food is also extremely influenced by culture, as often we tend to consider comforting what we know better. That’s why I asked a few friends from all over the world to share with us which is their favourite comfort food. It will be like travelling from country to country, through the best and most comforting foods. Get ready to be hungry.

Meanwhile, the blog has, like most businesses in Italy and beyond, jumped on the bandwagon of videoconferencing “replacements” of what used to be live events. Specifically, *Juls’ Kitchen* is on Udemy with three cooking courses (*Fresh Pasta Cooking Class*; *Vegan Cooking Class*; *Italian Dessert Cooking Class*) available

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<sup>1</sup> Depending on the intensity of the lockdown policies enforced by each government, the meaning of the Anglicism “lockdown” has varied considerably from country to country and from language to language, ranging from drastic measures that have prohibited all mobility within 200 metres from home, to a ban on inter-regional or intercity travel, to “intelligent lockdowns” that have discouraged movement without overtly forbidding it (de Haas, Faber and Hamersma 2020; Jarman et al. 2020; Ren 2020).

only in English, with Italian subtitles. Although the courses are described in Udemy as “a virtual Tuscan cooking course,” this captioning does not seem to reflect the Tuscan tradition as closely and as faithfully as the written blog posts do. In fact, the Udemy online courses appear to address an international audience entertaining a rather more stereotyped view of Tuscany than the average readers of the blog are expected to have. Furthermore, the courses are all delivered asynchronously, and described by the blogger herself in their description page as “a compromise:” therefore, they are perhaps not even expected to provide a real substitute for “teaching classes in our cooking studio in the countryside, meeting people at the local café to begin the market tour, working for clients and brands to create recipes and organizing workshops and gatherings,” which the blogger openly admits to missing.

An analysis of the word *travel* and its associated vocabulary in pre-pandemic blog posts reveals that references to travelling have more than halved since lockdown was first enforced, from 234.45 pmw pre-pandemically to 115.09 pmw post-pandemically. Therefore, “travelling from country to country” metaphorically, on videoconferencing and social networking platforms is certainly not quite the same as travelling in “real” life, as the blogger herself stresses in the description page of her online courses, but it is a way for her family business to “rethink our offer, to change it according to the completely new situation.” After all, *Juls’ Kitchen* is one of hundreds of thousands of small family businesses in Italy that have been hit very hard by the 2020 total lockdown (ISTAT 2021, 73), so it is quite normal for its owner to look for alternatives to stay afloat, as well as to express the hope “to return to a new normal, to be able to travel and see places, to have a pizza with a bunch of friends, or a cappuccino and a jam croissant at the local café as an act of normality, and not as an exceptional moment to remember” (from the blog entry entitled *Castagnaccio con la ricotta. Inizia l’attesa del Natale/‘Castagnaccio, chestnut cake with ricotta. Waiting for Christmas,’* dated 1 December 2020). However, the blogger is under no illusion that life online will ever be able to replace “real” live interaction, especially as far as a characteristically bodily experience like making and eating food is concerned.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed a largely unexplored area of food writing, culturemes, in a discourse that could be described as *lockdown food blogging*, focusing on new specific features of food blogs resulting from lifestyle changes triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated restrictive measures. The study has concentrated on one of the most popular food blogs in Italy, among the countries worst affected by COVID and adopting some of the most severe and long-lasting containment measures. This blog, however, was selected not particularly because of its popularity, but above all because it is, to the best of this author’s knowledge, the only Italian-English bilingual food blog that is entirely available in both languages at a native or near-native level of fluency.

Our research questions on culturemes have extended beyond food items and ingredients, focusing specifically on the evolution of food, time and lockdown related “semplates” (i.e. cultural frames or linguistic patterns). In fact, the quite

drastic COVID-related restrictive measures implemented in Italy since March 2020 seem to have initiated a change in Italian lifestyle, as well as in its perception by foreign foodies, potentially interested in using a blog like *Juls' Kitchen* as a pre-travel springboard to begin planning a holiday to Tuscany.

The results show that the lifestyle change ensuing from COVID-19 containment measures in Italy has affected not only the practice and narration of cooking by this food blogger, but also such fundamental tenets of culture as time. Time, indeed, is one of the main culturemes in this blog, before and during the COVID pandemic. This is not completely unexpected, as time is always of the essence whenever a person is cooking: it is both a procedural element in cooking instructions, and a measure of our common human experience, of which food making and eating is perhaps one of the most highly ritualized and culturally loaded epiphenomena. However, what our corpus data have revealed is a progressively tighter intertwining of these two views of time, i.e. procedural and experiential, with an increasingly strong determination, as the lockdown months dragged on, to come up with some rose-tinted-glasses self-care or coping strategies to make this “forced respite” time matter and count.

These strategies include walking down memory lane, e.g. in the excerpts reported about alchermes, dried chestnuts and other types of comfort food. However, these imaginary flights on the wings of old memories are arguably not open to the international readership of this blog, as they are one kind of cultureme that typically tends to get “lost in translation.” As a matter of fact, while most names of foods and ingredients *are* translated in this blog, and therefore do not seem to create any serious translation obstacles, what does not seem to carry from one language to the other, and consequently from one version of the blog to the other, is the feeling, the taste, and indeed the longing that certain traditional foods elicit.

However, perhaps the brightest silver lining that the blogger can see, as is probably the case for most people at this particular time in history, is the hope that

we'll get through this and we will rediscover a new country, which will be waiting with open arms for everyone to come back, to enjoy our food, our art and culture, our cities and countryside, the mountains and the seaside, but mainly, our generous hospitality (19 March 2020, English version).

Overall, our investigation has revealed that most differences in the understanding of the role of food in the two versions of the blog are not connected with (un)translatability, but rather with the blogger's expectations of the food and world knowledge of her followers, reading and interacting with her respectively in the local language (in this case, Italian), and in ELF for social networking. This consideration may be tentatively generalized to the discourse of multilingual food blogging today, as it emerges quite clearly not only from the study of the present blog but also from a previous one within the same project (Fusari 2021).

The answer to our ultimate research question, i.e. whether the experience of food making marketed by the blog, especially through on-site cooking classes, could somehow “move” online, is, however, largely negative. The data actually show that food narratives, like many other kinds of narratives, can indeed provide solace from lockdown-induced feelings of isolation and trauma, but they do not



have enough meaning potential to provide a substitute for “live” activities. That is why the word *travel* has not only been progressively disappearing from this blog, as lockdown months rolled by, but the blogger herself also describes her brand-new online cooking courses, made available on a popular e-learning platform, as a “compromise,” made in the hope that better days will lie ahead.

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