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Co-Creating a Foundational European Food Sharing Dictionary for Just Urban Food Governance

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Abstract

Transforming urban and peri-urban (UPU) food systems towards sustainability requires not only new, more inclusive governance approaches, but also a deeper understanding of the linguistic and cultural dimensions of diverse food practices, including food sharing initiatives (FSIs). In transnational governance contexts such as the EU, where multilingualism is foundational, linguistic diversity profoundly influences how UPU foodscapes and food-related practices are conceptualised and governed. Language both reveals and conceals—rendering certain practices visible while obscuring others. This (in)visibilisation has significant policy and governance implications for recognising, protecting, and supporting diverse UPU food sharing practices. In this article, we reflect on the negotiated process of creating the first European Food Sharing Dictionary, a collaborative, co-creative, and cross-sectoral effort to translate the terms used to describe FSIs and their activities in 25 EU languages. This highlights the challenges and opportunities of negotiating meanings across cultural and geographic boundaries. We argue that understanding the socio-linguistic dimensions of food sharing not only deepens insights into UPU food sharing practices and food systems, but also creates the foundations for FSIs to build horizontal networks and coalitions across Europe. In the context of moving towards a more just post-2030 sustainability agenda, we find that such a shared, translated lexicon serves as a practical and political tool to foster visibility, solidarity, and collective action among diverse FSIs, while enabling more effective UPU food system governance.

Keywords

counter-hegemony; food culture; food sharing initiatives; governing by translation; institutional translation; just transitions; multilingual governance; politics of language; politics of translation

1. Introduction

As clearly articulated in international policy and academic circles, transforming urban and peri-urban (UPU) food systems towards sustainability requires new governance approaches. Less clearly outlined within these debates is the concomitant requirement for a deeper understanding of the linguistic and cultural dimensions of food practices that surround and shape food governance architecture. In transnational governance contexts, such as the EU, where multilingualism is foundational, linguistic diversity profoundly influences how UPU foodscapes and food-related practices are conceptualised and governed. In response, in this article we foreground matters of language and translation in relation to one common feature of UPU food systems, food sharing initiatives (FSIs). We define food sharing as “collective actions around food and food related items, spaces, skills and knowledge. It can take place between friends, families, neighbours, communities and strangers across the food system from growing, cooking and eating, to surplus food redistribution” (Phelan et al., 2023, p. 6). FSIs are then initiatives designed to facilitate such sharing. In doing so:

FSIs adopt different organisational forms, including co-operatives and social enterprises, charities and for-profits, and they can be led by grassroots, community, private sector or state actors. Examples include seed libraries, community gardens, food related co-operatives, community kitchens, and surplus food redistribution organisations. (Phelan et al., 2023, p. 6)

Mapping activities have already identified that FSIs, in all their diversity, are present across every continent, but this research was limited by the use of only English vocabulary (Davies et al., 2017a, 2017b). In response, this article reports on the development of the European Food Sharing Dictionary (FSD), which is constituted by a multilingual set of terms and definitions relevant to describing FSIs and their activities. This is important because FSIs are typically invisible to municipal governments and often marginalised in urban food governance (Herrero & Moragues-Faus, 2025). Using native language search terms will improve identification of FSIs during mapping processes, revealing a more comprehensive FSI landscape. This brings multiple benefits for different actors. It will help build solidarity amongst FSIs locally and internationally, allowing them to identify similar initiatives within and beyond local areas, opening up possibilities for the development of a sectoral voice for FSIs within Europe. It will also make FSIs more visible to governing actors across scales from municipalities to the EU, with a common vocabulary being an essential building block for establishing common rules, guidelines, and technical specifications.

Language is critical in shaping UPU food system futures, not merely as a mechanical tool of interpersonal communication, but also because it influences who is heard, what contributions are understood and valued, and subsequently acted upon. The ways in which issues are framed and how problems are named affects what solutions are legitimised, and whose knowledge is recognised. This is an inherently political process, raising important questions about both how conversations are conducted and who is enabled to participate in them. Certainly, developing a more intentional and inclusive lexicon will be essential for any just post-2030 transformation of urban food systems.

In the remainder of the article, we first distil diverse yet salient strands in existing research around language and food, before outlining how we approached the development of a FSD for the EU. Two core themes emerge from the collaborative dictionary co-creation process: the complexity of translation and the productive nature of establishing a common linguistic understanding of food sharing. We show how, through

co-creating a multilingual FSD, we have provided the foundations for a more dynamic tool—one that will require continual evolution and reimagining—to engage a wider variety of communities and stakeholders in food sharing. This holds potential to enable, empower, and inspire transnational cooperation in the face of persistent sustainability challenges at the UPU scale. We conclude that the collaborative construction of a shared vocabulary for food sharing, which makes visible the transnationality of food sharing movements and practices, offers a mechanism to amplify diversity in food systems.

2. FSIs and the Politics of Language and Translation in Food Governance

Food governance in the EU has long been dominated by commercial logics of food, marginalising diverse economies supported by FSIs (Herrero & Moragues-Faus, 2025). For example, community gardens and neighbourhood kitchens are largely overlooked at the EU scale. Surplus food redistribution is noted in waste and social funding laws (such as the Waste Framework Directive [Directive of 19 November 2008, 2008] and European Social Fund Plus legislation [Regulation of 24 June 2021, 2021]), but this is in relation to food donation rather than recognising the substantive grassroots practices of FSIs undertaking these practices. While the 2020 Farm to Fork Strategy (European Commission, 2020) mentioned surplus food distribution once, it dropped out of the 2025 strategy, *A Vision for Agriculture and Food* (European Commission, 2025). Local authorities are mentioned as being well placed to lead engagement on shaping more sustainable food environments through community-led initiatives, such as through food policy councils, but this merely gestures towards local action and does not explicitly name FSIs. Meanwhile, food poverty is mainly addressed through social policy instruments, such as school schemes and food banks, not through collective acts of food sharing. Only in the Food Partnership Action Plan published in 2025, part of the Urban Agenda for the EU, are FSIs explicitly mentioned: “This action will consider the interaction between national entities and local initiatives, such as urban food sharing initiatives, looking at the role that regional and national actors could have in recognising the role and impact of these initiatives” (Urban Agenda for the EU, 2025, p. 26). However, while the Urban Agenda is an official EU governance mechanism at the EU scale, the Action Plan is not a Commission communication and is non-binding (European Commission, 2016).

The development of the FSD is, we argue, therefore central to building more inclusive and participatory forms of UPU food governance. Its standardised multilingual approach facilitates identification and classification of FSIs, which itself allows new forms of food governance centred on inclusion and knowledge co-production, a pre-requisite for meaningful participatory governance, to emerge (Moragues-Faus & Battersby, 2021). As identified in a scoping review of FSI governance (Herrero & Moragues-Faus, 2025), there is a clear need to move beyond siloed, top-down approaches to embrace more inclusive, multi-actor arrangements, including FSIs. The FSD assists with this by providing the “conceptual terrain” (Moragues-Faus & Battersby, 2021, p. 4) needed for different departments and diverse practitioners to include FSI activities in food governance. This is important when seeking to strengthen or scale FSIs, a process which in many contexts is inherently political, not just logistical (Fiore et al., 2025).

When explaining the politics inherent within our everyday use of language, Gramsci (1971) emphasises the need to understand language as more than a communicative tool. He urges us to view language as a primary site of political struggle and as foundational to social order. In arguing that every language contains within it conceptions of the world and of dominant cultures, Gramsci asserts that studying the language used by people may offer insights into their conception of the world.

Of relevance to our discussion of linguistic politics around food is what Gramsci terms “common sense,” the uncritical and very often contradictory way that people perceive the world, which is shaped by the language and culture imposed by ruling elites to maintain hegemony. In shaping people’s perceptions of the world through language and culture, oppressed people can come to view hegemonic regimes and their systems—for example, globalised market-led food systems—as natural, even when faced with the violence of oppression or marginalisation. Relatedly, Gramsci introduces the concept of “normative grammar” to describe the use of national languages as a political tool for unifying a people while conversely alienating oppressed peoples through the suppression of local dialects and their embedded cultures and world conceptions. Yet, the hegemonic politics of language can be challenged to produce counter-hegemonies. Indeed, as hegemony is maintained through culture and language, it must be challenged there first. But in the face of hegemonic market language that dominates food policy, how can we begin to produce a counter-hegemony that might support a just transition? This is a question underpinning our co-creation of the first multilingual FSD, the focus of this article. It certainly enables, through the promotion of communities’ “spontaneous grammars” (everyday language) around food sharing, the formation of “organic intellectuals” who might use language and culture to articulate the interests of their own people for transformative action (Gramsci, 1971).

In the context of this article, the focus is on the language and vocabulary of FSIs, which extends beyond mainstream terms typically used to articulate modes of exchange, such as price and profit, so prevalent in a heavily commodified global food system (Jackson et al., 2021). So, rather than focusing on the languages of oppressed people that Gramsci refers to in his work, this centres the language used to describe the marginalised activities of FSIs, but his insights remain salient.

Existing scholarship on food and language engages with diverse settings and issues. Of relevance to matters of food sharing, and resonating with the Gramscian framing set out above, there have been studies foregrounding translation in an increasingly interconnected but highly uneven global food system (Desjardins, 2021), while others have centred a political ecology of translation at the interface of food systems, technology, and language (Cronin, 2015). There are, however, blind spots. As noted by Chiaro and Rossato (2015), the interconnections between food, culture, and translation remain under-researched, despite being infused with power and politics, involving fundamental questions of social legitimacy (Canfield, 2022).

In multilingual governance contexts, the importance of language, and indeed translation, is particularly pressing. In the EU, multilingualism is foundational to its democratic legitimacy and institutional integrity. The first act adopted by the European Council was Regulation 1 from 1958, which is the legal instrument that governs the EU institutions’ official and working language regime (Council of the European Economic Community, 1958). Initially including the four official languages of the six founding member states—Dutch, French, German, and Italian—the act has been subsequently amended following the accession of each new member state. Today, there are 24 official EU languages. Beyond a mere logistical necessity, the expansion of official languages is a deliberate mechanism to ensure that the EU’s governance remains accessible and transparent to citizens. Here, multilingualism plays a dualistic role, enabling communicative efficiency while also marking pluralistic identities, reflecting its member states’ cultural, social, and historical diversity (Extra & Gorter, 2008; Waschak, 2025). As Waschak (2025, p. 75) points out, within the European project, multilingualism acts as “a manifestation of democratic inclusion and cultural richness.” Yet, there are

limitations and challenges inherent in this multilingual and culturally inclusive governance regime, particularly in terms of the hegemonic language of the market that dominates food policy.

Within multilingual governance institutions, such as the EU, translation plays a crucial role. Yet it is often overlooked by scholars outside of translation studies. As Koskinen (2014a, p. 481) argues, “regulatory organizational systems (i.e., institutions) that operate in a multilingual environment can and often do employ translation in performing their governing function. In that case, they govern by translation.” To better understand this relationship between institutions, governance, and translation, translation studies scholars have increasingly employed the concept of institutional translation (Kang, 2019; Koskinen, 2014b; Prieto Ramos, 2024). Gouadec (2007, p. 36) defines institutional translation as “any translation carried out in the name, on behalf of, and for the benefit of institutions.” Such an understanding brings into question matters of power and, more specifically, the role of translation as a practice for asserting power and control, and the role of translators as practitioners of governance. While complicating and expanding our understanding of institutional translation by drawing from sociological definitions of institutions which describe normative systems in five areas of one’s life (economy, education, family, government, and religion), Koskinen (2014a) simultaneously draws a useful distinction between two types of institutional translation practices. Firstly, there are the translational practices that are directly linked to the structures and practices of government, understood by Koskinen (2014a, p. 481) in the Foucauldian sense as “conducting the conduct.” These translational practices, which happen in regulated environments and are overseen by people operating in official capacities, should be distinguished “from other forms of translation that, while they too take place in the same or similar institutional contexts and may be regulated and controlled, to a lesser or greater degree of institutionalization, are employed for different purposes” (2014a, pp. 481–482). It is the latter of these understandings that we find to be the most promising, both for explaining our work in co-creating the FSD but also more broadly in terms of challenging the linguistic and cultural homogenisation around commodification that we see as stifling food systems transformation.

The development of the FSD had at its core a co-creation approach to translation. We hoped that this would allow for the everyday socio-linguistic and place-based specificities of food sharing terms to surface. It also helped bridge our academic and activist sensibilities, allowing us to take a position more akin to Koskinen’s (2014a) second type of institutional translation. Co-creation offers a multi-directional approach to problem solving that deconstructs hierarchies between government, academics, and citizens (Leino & Puumala, 2021). When used in the documentation and translation of food sharing terms, co-creation offers productive avenues for challenging market hegemony, and indeed its “normative grammar,” instead emphasising the plurality of language for food sharing practices and cultures, their place-based nature, and their links with specific local historical events. Acknowledging this diversity is particularly pressing in multilingual governance contexts as translation cannot be assumed to represent the complete or pure transferrals of meaning. Rather, “the products of translation are instead hybrid texts, born of the inevitable shifts in meaning involved in the translation process” (de Araújo & Germes, 2016, p. 4). Further, if translation necessitates such adaptation, then we inevitably lose the nuances of food that differs “from one village to the next, not to mention from one nation to another at the other end of the world. And with this, we can lose subtle ‘insights into cultures’” (Waxman, 2008, as cited in Orel, 2013). As such, any attempt to carry out institutional translations of food sharing terms—in Koskinen’s (2014a) Foucauldian top-down understanding—cannot produce fully accurate transferrals of meaning of the diverse community-led food sharing activities and cultures practised by citizens across the 27 member states. Instead, such top-down

hegemonic translations risk homogenising language around food sharing practices. In keeping with our counter-hegemonic aspirations, the following section outlines the co-creation approach adopted in the creative construction of the FSD.

3. Co-Creating the FSD

The process of co-creating a multilingual lexicon of food sharing terms had multiple components. The foundational phase, initiated in 2016, used a collaborative team-based approach to identify a corpus of relevant terms in English to manually map FSIs internationally using search engines (Davies et al., 2017a). The team included international researchers from across various social and natural sciences working closely together in one location over a period of months. This included extensive reviews of literature, online crowdsourcing of candidate terms, and intensive reasoned negotiations over inclusion or exclusion in relation to the working definition of food sharing. The hand-crafted process of identification, classification, and contention which enabled engagement with longstanding as well as emergent vocabularies is inherently creative (Gallenstein, 2003). Terms included not only those describing what the initiatives are or do, such as “community garden” or “community growing,” but also the mode of sharing employed and the organisational structure of those initiatives. While a preliminary scoping typology provided the ultimate starting point for dictionary building (Davies & Legg, 2018), the collaborative process added new terms and categories via the expanded multilingual and multidisciplinary expertise involved. An initial list of 28 keywords based on previous mapping work (Davies et al., 2017a) was developed and translated using in-house language skills and Google Translate. However, assuming cultural homogenisation in terms and meanings (see Bhabha, 1994) was recognised as a key limitation. While some English words like “food sharing” have travelled internationally, as seen with foodsharing.de, a surplus food redistribution initiative which was established in Germany and is now operating in Austria and Switzerland, such linguistic mobility cannot be generally assumed.

In 2023, the limitations of the manual methods and reliance on English language terms were addressed through the EU-funded Innovation Action CULTIVATE project, where an expanded co-creation approach brought together academics, technical experts in large language models (LLMs) and artificial intelligence (AI), and local actors involved in the practice and governance of food sharing through FSIs. The goal of this co-creation approach was to co-create the FSD (Phelan et al., 2023), establishing a broader list of multilingual terms to enable more comprehensive mapping and categorising of FSIs (Davies et al., 2025). Our approach was iterative as we tested methods and revised them accordingly. It consisted of eight steps of multi-actor collaboration:

1. Expanding the initial list of 28 English language food sharing terms used in manual mapping with LLM and AI technical experts to ensure terms’ relevance for automated searching experimentation. Definitions of these terms were added.
2. Using AI-powered neural machine translation tools—specifically Google Translate, which uses Google Neural Machine Translation—to translate the texts into 11 target languages spoken by members of the CULTIVATE consortium’s 19 partner organisations.
3. Workshopping the expanded list of English language terms and definitions, and their translations, with consortium members at an in-person session in Dublin, adding alternative relevant terms, and providing feedback on the translations generated using Google Neural Machine Translation, which were deemed to be unsatisfactory.

4. Improving the processes of translation through professional translations of the expanded set of terms into the additional 24 target languages (23 official EU languages plus Catalan as the dominant language in Barcelona, a hub location in the CULTIVATE project).
5. Conducting a translation quality assessment (TQA) of the professional translations by native speakers. Reviewers were asked to consider two broad criteria: intelligibility of translations (is the translation understandable?); and fidelity of the translation (does the meaning conveyed by the translation reflect the original?). This step sought to ensure translations were accurate, functional, and appropriate. It proved to be essential as even the professionally translated transcripts often failed to capture the meaning of local food sharing practices. Responses were recorded on worksheets noting:
 - Accuracy of meaning: Systematically compare each translation against the original, working term by term and definition by definition. Reviewers were asked to focus solely on the meaning at this stage and recommended to use hard copies as it allows for more thorough reviewing than working from screens.
 - Wording: Identify and amend any unusual, unnatural, or unclear wording, with reviewers being instructed to investigate any text that made them pause while reading.
 - Formatting and Technicalities: Ensure that there are no spelling or grammatical errors and that spelling and formatting are consistent throughout.
 - Expansion: Propose additional or alternative terms for food sharing activities.
6. Crowdsourcing, via social networks and media channels, reviewers for the 12 target languages for which there were no native speakers in the CULTIVATE project.
7. Compiling the lists of terms and formatting the FSD, working with the CULTIVATE project's communication and dissemination partner, ICONS.
8. Reviewing the FSD within the CULTIVATE consortium to ensure accuracy, quality, and alignment with the agreed description of the project deliverable.

In total, the process covered 178 English language terms and definitions used for the broader task of mapping and categorising FSIs. The FSD itself comprises a core index of 43 terms and their definitions translated into 25 languages. These 43 terms were chosen as each:

- Is important for understanding food sharing as defined by the project team;
- Has some degree of international applicability based on the project consortium's expertise;
- Is a key search and/or categorisation term rather than a supplementary term added to searches to expand/refine search results;
- Is spelled in the singular form, although plural variations are included under the singular terms where relevant.

There are four general terms and 23 specific terms for food sharing activities organised by the core categories of growing, cooking and eating, and redistribution. There are nine terms for the different modes of sharing and seven terms covering organisational formation (Table 1). In the FSD, any additional emergent terms or variations from the translation process are also included.

Table 1. FSD terms.

General terms	Food sharing	Terms for cooking and eating	Community dinner	Terms for modes of sharing	Bartering
	Food sharing initiative		Community kitchen		Collecting
	Food skill sharing/ sharing food skills		Community meal		Food barter
	Sharing economy		Kitchen incubator		Food gifting
Terms for growing	Community garden		Kitchen share		Food swap
	Community supported agriculture		Meal sharing		Foraging
	Land share		Social dinner		Gifting
	Seed exchange		Supper club		Gleaning
	Seed library	Terms for surplus food redistribution	Compost share	Terms for sharing organisation	Selling
	Seed saving		Crop swap		Charity and non-profit organisation
	Seed swap		Dumpster diving		Club, association, and network
	Shared garden		Food recovery		Cooperative
	Tool share		Food rescue		For-profit organisation
			Surplus food redistribution		Informal organisation
					Public sector
					Social enterprise

Source: Phelan et al. (2023).

Ultimately, the knowledge collated through co-creation allowed for the contextual understandings needed for transformative food system action to be identified; an approach grounded in activist aspirations that views translation as a form of activism for empowering “voices made invisible by the global power of English and the politics of language” (Baker, 2013, p. 23; see also Manić, 2026, for a discussion of translation as a form of ecoactivism). As Ziervogel et al. (2022, p. 607) argue, if “capacity building processes shift from the top-down transferal of existing knowledge to the co-creation of contextual understandings, they have the potential to deliver more transformative adaptation.” While this expanded and grounded process has improved the robustness and relevance of core terms relating to how the practice of food sharing through initiatives is articulated across Europe, there remain challenges and limitations. The following section discusses the key issues that emerged through the co-creation of the FSD.

4. Translational Challenges of Food Sharing's "Spontaneous Grammars"

Food and its associated practices of production, preparation, distribution, and consumption are geographically, temporally, and socio-culturally diverse (Phelan, 2026). As Brulotte and Di Giovine (2014, p. 1) explain:

We all must eat to sustain ourselves. Yet, how we eat, and what we eat, and when we eat, and with whom we eat, all uniquely vary from place to place, group to group, time to time—thanks to longstanding geographic, economic, social, and cosmological differences throughout the world.

Similarly, how people share food with each other, how people collectively organise to form FSIs, and how and what these FSIs share is equally diverse (see Davies et al., 2017b, 2025). Given the place-specificity of food sharing practices and initiatives, it is unsurprising then that the language used to describe and make sense of these practices varies across groups and places. This cultural and geolinguistic diversity and specificity raises significant challenges for institutional translation, and for activist and governmental agendas to address injustices in food systems through collective action. If food sharing practices vary depending on local context and historical geographies, and the terms used to describe them are specific to these local manifestations, then can translation make these "spontaneous grammars" truly knowable through the transferral of meaning?

A key challenge in co-creating the FSD was that while the translated transcripts may have been grammatically correct, they often failed to adequately communicate the meaning of the food sharing practices in the target languages or failed to capture the diversity of terms used in the target language for that practice. Although some of the English language terms could be translated into target languages using one term, many required multiple translations to capture the diversity of local ways of describing the food sharing practice in question. As such, we needed to adapt our process, employing a similar creative construction approach to translation as was used to create the original English language terms (Davies et al., 2017a; see also Brashi, 2021, for an example of adaptive translation methodologies). As a result, the number of FSD terms—excluding definitions—in each language varies from 43 English language terms to 89 Romanian and 90 German terms (see Figure 1).

For example, the term "food swap" was translated into Catalan by the professional translators as *Intercanvi d'aliments*, which directly translates to "food exchange." While this translation is grammatically correct, it is only one of several terms used to describe this food sharing practice in the region. In reviewing these translations, Catalan-speaking experts in the CULTIVATE consortium added additional terms to better reflect the cultural reality, including *troc alimentari* (food barter), *barata d'aliments* (low cost/cheap food), and *menjar de germanor* (brotherhood or fellowship meal). These additional terms represent distinctive local socio-linguistic manifestations of this food sharing practice and demonstrate the difficulties of translating food practices and terminology between cultures. Such plurality was often indicative of food sharing terms' political and historical geographies, diverse regional cultures, or anglophone influence. The former of these is exemplified by the term "community kitchen" and its translation into German. While the original translation provided by translators was *Gemeinschaftsküche*, our translation review process identified six additional terms. One of these terms is a grammatical addition (*Gemeinschaftsküchen*), while the other five (*Küche für Alle*, *KüfA*, *Volksküche*, *VolxKüche*, and *VoKu*) signify specific local histories of community kitchens in the German context. The latter three terms stemmed from the European anarchist and squatter movement of the 1970s and 1980s, meaning "people's kitchen," with the "x" in *VolxKüche* being added to disassociate the term from nationalistic or state-sponsored connotations of the term *Volk*. The terms *Küche*

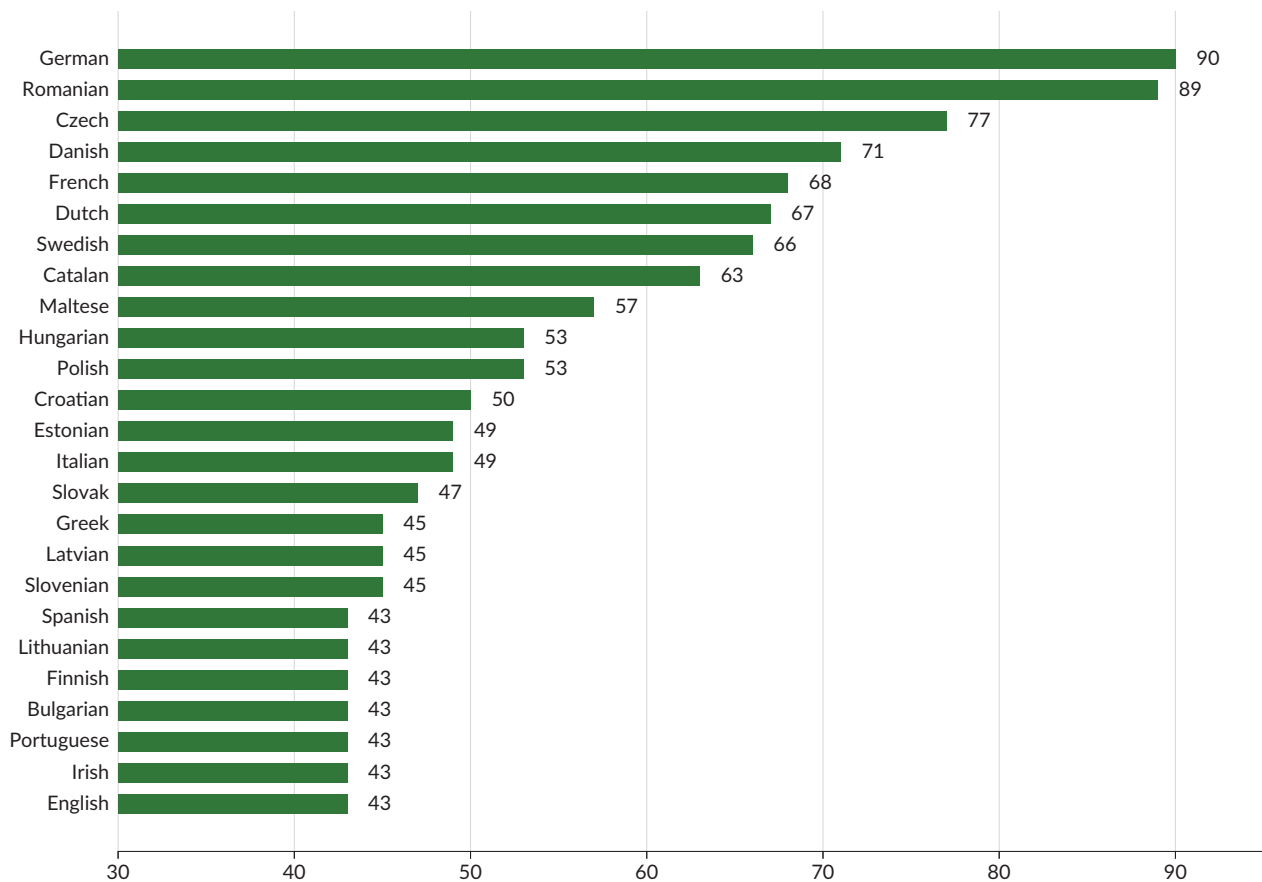


Figure 1. Number of translated terms in the FSD by language.

für Alle (kitchen for all) and *KüfA* were later adopted by some groups to promote inclusivity while avoiding such nationalistic connotations altogether. This example shows that when seeking to develop a multilingual lexicon of food sharing terms across languages, local cultures and socio-political histories are essential for effectively transferring meaning.

Another challenge that emerged in co-creating the FSD were instances where no translation was provided for English language terms. This was due to three reasons. Firstly, the pluralised spelling of certain terms was not relevant in some languages. For example, no translation was provided for the plural term “shared gardens” in Croatian or Swedish, with the term offered in Dutch being the same as the singular “shared garden.” As such, we did not include all the plural terms in the final version of FSD, although they are included in the list of search and categorisation terms used for mapping FSIs. Secondly, the lack of translated terms in some cases shows that while food sharing may happen in every culture, not all food sharing practices are performed universally, or at least, local food sharing practices are not understood in the same way between contexts. In the initial translation of terms, the term “foraging” was translated into Italian as *foraggiamento*, a grammatically correct translation. Yet, following the publication of the FSD, it was explained by a local expert that this term is not used by FSIs in Italy, as it refers to how animals gather their food rather than a human practice. While in English foraging is an umbrella term (or hypernym) with a general meaning that covers a range of more specific actions, e.g., blackberry picking and harvesting wild mushrooms, this is not the case in Italian, where there is no general or superordinate term. It is not that foraging activities do not take place in Italy, but rather that they are precisely named according to the specific type of food

foraged. Conversely, in some cases the same translated term was provided for multiple English language terms. This highlights the translational complexity of co-creating a European FSD and the interplay between language, food sharing practices, and locally specific manifestations. In a similar fashion to how some English language terms lacked a single counterpart in some target languages, indicating socio-linguistic heterogeneity in those cultural contexts, differences in food sharing practices from an anglophone perspective are not necessarily considered distinctive in other languages. While some of this translational repetition can be attributed to grammatical differences in how plural nouns are conjugated, several instances signified shared meaning rather than grammatical limitations. For example, six translations were provided for both “meal sharing” and “community meal” in Dutch, with both of these terms sharing five translations: *sociaal tafel* (social table), *sociaal tafels* (social tables), *eettafels* (dining tables), *samen eten* (eating together), and *aanschuiftafel* (communal table).

The third example of where target language translations were not provided for English terms is the use of English language loanwords. When translating the full list of search and categorisation terms and definitions for FSIs (178 terms including the 43 FSD terms), loanwords were identified in 19 of the 24 languages. Loanwords are those adopted within another language with little or no translation, although spelling or pronunciation may be different and change over time. Only Bulgarian, Finnish, Greek, Lithuanian, and Polish did not include any loanwords. The highest frequency of English loanwords occurred in relation to terms for food sharing activities, the pluralised spelling of these terms, and terms for FSIs’ organisational forms. Some of this loanword usage can be accounted for by lexical similarity; the sharedness of words due to longer cross-cultural exchanges. This is likely the case in relation to “club,” which was included in nine translated transcripts, as well as the shared spelling of French organisational formation terminology such as *association* and *organisation*.

While most English loanwords appeared in the broader list of FSI search and categorisation terms rather than the shorter list included in the FSD, English loanwords nevertheless featured in nine languages in the FSD, either in place of target language translations completely or as additional alternative terms. However, we only count instances where English terms or lexically similar words constitute the entirety of the local food sharing term as identified by translators, rather than instances where they are used as part of a longer translated term. For example, the term “supper club” is counted in five of these nine languages (Dutch, French, German, Italian, and Portuguese) as it was included in its entire form. Meanwhile, the French translation for the FSD term “Club, Association and Network” was provided as *Club, association et réseau*, including two component words with lexical similarity to English, but it was not included as an example of a complete English language loanword usage. The nine languages in the FSD in which English loanwords were provided in substitute for target language translations entirely or in addition to them are German (six terms), Dutch (two terms), Maltese (two terms), Danish (one term), Estonian (one term), French (one term), Italian (one term), Latvian (one term), and Portuguese (one term). Of these, English language terms are most frequently used in other Western Germanic languages (German and Dutch) and Maltese, for which English language terms were provided alongside Maltese translations. The linguistic influence of English on Maltese food sharing terminology is unsurprising given Malta’s history of more than 150 years of British colonial rule, during which time the English language became deeply embedded within Maltese education and government institutions, today being recognised as the country’s second official language (Paggio & Gatt, 2017). In addition to the two direct loanwords from English (“dumpster diving” and “gleaning”), many of the other Maltese translated terms also evidenced the linguistic influence of English—and indeed Italian—with

vocabulary being adapted to fit Maltese spelling and phonetic patterns. For example, the Maltese translation of “community fridge” is *frigg tal-komunità*, with *frigg* being adapted from the English word “fridge” and *komunità* being adopted and adapted from the Italian *comunità*.

In pointing to these examples, we are not suggesting that the plethora of “spontaneous grammars” for locally specific food sharing practices constitutes an irreconcilable barrier to translation attempts, especially those with counter-hegemonic agendas like our own. Rather, we argue that institutional translation needs to account for the geographical unevenness of “spontaneous grammars” through the adoption of adaptive translation methodologies if it is to challenge its own hegemonic tendencies. The complexity of translating food sharing’s “spontaneous grammars” exposes the politics of language in governance as it leads to the establishment of cultural and structural inequalities between languages (Phillipson, 1992), or, to use a Gramscian framing, it forces the standardisation of language to create imposed “normative grammars” (Gramsci, 1971). These “normative grammars,” while serving as an important governance tool institutionally, can simultaneously have homogenising impacts, leading to cultural hegemony and replacing local dialects and everyday speech. Yet, the shared language provided by “normative grammars” is essential not only for coherent governance but also for achieving political unity and enabling mobilisation against oppression. The goal then, following Gramsci, is not to struggle against the formation of “normative grammars” completely but to challenge the “normative grammars” that are imposed from the top down and which dismiss local dialects and cultures. Ultimately, we understand Gramsci’s work as a call to critically reassess whose language is standardised into “normative grammars” and how this language is used in hopes for the development of a democratic, organic, and evolving standardisation; one that might empower people through linguistic and cultural recognition, rather than forcing conformity. Here, the significance of Gramsci’s argument becomes clear in relation to our work in co-creating a FSD that, while providing a starting point for a shared lexical governance tool at an EU scale, is grounded in the “spontaneous grammars” and diverse cultural geographies of FSIs. Indeed, such a counter-hegemonic approach to institutional translation is one that necessitates from the outset an acknowledgement that any attempt to condense the diversity of food sharing’s “spontaneous grammars” to a definitive list of terms can only ever be a partial snapshot, one that necessitates recurring critical reappraisal. Given the role of translation as a governance tool, and the heterogeneity and fluidity of food sharing’s “spontaneous grammars,” the EU’s approach to institutional translation and the extent to which it allows for adaptive methodologies need to be interrogated in the context of urban food systems in the post-2030 agenda.

5. Conclusion

Drawing on our experiences of co-creating the first European FSD, this article has presented several critical findings regarding the intersection of language, food sharing cultures, politics, and the governance of urban food systems that should be considered in any post-2030 food sustainability agenda. Firstly, and perhaps most foundationally for our work, the FSD makes visible the diverse vocabularies of food sharing across Europe, vocabularies that are currently missing from major EU food policy documents in any language. While positive developments are emerging, such as the explicit mention of FSIs in the Food Partnership Action Plan (Urban Agenda for the EU, 2025), the focus in that document remains on generic categories of urban agriculture and with reference to public land for food production in urban areas. We conclude that excluding food sharing practices and FSIs from such documents is not a neutral communicative tool, but a political site where the future of sustainable food systems may be contested. The governance of urban food system sustainability

transitions is not solely a matter of technical or structural reform, but a deeply linguistic and political endeavour. By centring diverse food sharing terminology, we have argued that the language used to describe, categorise, and govern food practices is important for recognition.

In marginalising and excluding diverse food sharing terminology from public, political, and governance arenas, the potentially transformative “spontaneous grammars” of locally embedded and community-led FSI are obscured, while the central and impactful role that they play in challenging current injustices is ignored within current governance frameworks. Identifying pathways and tools for working with both the sharedness and plurality of food sharing cultures and languages across transnational governance contexts, such as the EU, is essential for empowering citizens and “organic intellectuals” to create and foster counter-hegemonies. Such counter-hegemonies grounded in food sharing practices might, we hope, cultivate locally appropriate and impactful solutions to the multiplicity of challenges and systemic injustices of our current food systems. FSIs are, after all, not insignificant, but a pervasive and potentially transformative means for achieving more just and sustainable urban food governance (Davies et al., 2026).

Secondly, our approach emphasises the inadequacy of generic, commercial translation approaches for capturing the diversity of lived realities in relation to UPU food sharing practices and initiatives. The standard commercial translation approaches we encountered often failed to capture the actual practices of food sharing, which are deeply embedded in local political, cultural, and historical geographies. Ultimately, the process revealed that vocabularies of food sharing are linguistically diverse, with the number of terms identified often far exceeding the number of English terms initially identified. This diversity of terms and the cultural specificity of the practices these terms represent identified both a technological and professional gap in translation services.

Thirdly, our work has evidenced the value of co-creation methodologies for addressing the limitations of top-down translation approaches. Our findings suggest that “governing by translation” requires co-creation approaches if we are to make strides towards more inclusive and just urban food systems post-2030. Our findings show that translation is never a neutral or direct transfer of meaning. Rather, it is a creative and contentious process of making diverse food cultures visible that requires flexibility, adaptability, and collaboration. By moving from automated machine translation to iterative, community-led refinement, the FSD serves as a counter-hegemonic tool that validates local knowledge while facilitating transnational cooperation. This is, we hope, a first step in a longer process of “institutional translation” that empowers rather than homogenises.

Yet, despite its successes in producing the FSD, this approach is not without its limitations. While pioneering in its objective to collate food sharing terminology from 25 languages into a single tool, the FSD is ultimately a snapshot of food sharing languages and cultures at a specific moment in time as understood by a particular group of experts and citizen scientists. As such, it is indeed limited by the knowledge and expertise that the authors and co-creators could provide within the short timeframe of a funded research project. Similarly, food sharing practices, as with all cultural practices, evolve over time, as does the language used to describe them. As such, the terms included in the FSD may lose, or gain, potency as we move into post-2030 sustainable urban food agendas, while currently omitted terms may become more significant. Certainly, the FSD in its current format is only a starting point for further discussion and action; it will require additional resources and labour to expand and revise. There are alternative pathways to be explored beyond standard research funding

pathways, such as gamifying the dictionary through an online revision process, perhaps via integration with crowdsourced platforms such as Wikipedia. However, there are challenges of quality control when putting such activities into the digital universe.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the FSD, it has been pivotal for collaborative development of decision support tools for strengthening and expanding sustainable food sharing across Europe. The FSD terms formed the bedrock for systematically identifying FSIs across Europe (Wu et al., 2024), which have in turn been used to estimate the sustainability contributions from FSIs at the UPU scale (Davies et al., 2026). Beyond this, it informed how various supports, from serious games to governance innovations (Moragues-Faus et al., 2026), were translated for wider uptake. There is also scope to expand this impact through an emerging community of food sharing practice (Louvain et al., in press), to expand transnational FSI cooperation across the EU, and for more forensic interdisciplinary research with linguists and anthropologists to further understand the nuances of practices and vocabularies of food sharing in contemporary Europe. In the face of persistent global challenges, recognising the diversity of food sharing and FSIs through the lens of language offers a vital pathway toward more resilient, just, and culturally resonant urban food governance futures. Through the collaborative construction of meaning, we do more than define food sharing; we provide the linguistic foundations for its transformative potential to be realised.

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Conflict of Interests

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