A Squirt of Ketchup and a Dollop of Remoulade: The Linguistics of Restaurant Service

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INTRODUCTION

Food is necessary for survival, but it is not just the substance of food that is important. The act of eating is ingrained in social life. We prepare feasts for all holidays; we take our spouses out to fancy French restaurants; we message our busy friends that "we've got to catch up over lunch some time!". Food has evolved with society, reflecting changes in both resources and values. Compared to ancient foragers, our resources are abundant and our culture is explorative. As a result, there has been an emergence of haute cuisine, food fads, and fine dining restaurants. This subculture of the culinary world has turned food into an indulgence. How do these dining experiences reflect current cultures in society? Moreover, what factors underlie what is considered an enjoyable dining experience? Why would someone spend $100 on a meal when there are equally satiating meals that cost less than $10? Is it merely the food, or are other factors at play?

Literature Review

In a study about the linguistics of restaurant reviews, Jurafsky et. al (2014) conducted statistical analysis of Yelp reviews from restaurants in Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington D.C. Among other findings, the researchers coded two significant variables that related to cost of the restaurant, with one of them being language complexity. More expensive restaurant reviews contained longer words like "specifications" and "exquisitely." In parallel, Jurafsky found that longer description words correlated with a higher price for that dish (2014, p. 14).

Another gastrolinguist noted differences in autonomy given to a customer. Menus from a fine dining restaurant may include set menus with "an aperitif," "scrambled eggs and migas," and "grilled paine farm squab" (Lakoff, 2006, p. 151). In comparison, a menu from a more affordable Chinese restaurant may offer "vegetable with shrimps, chicken, beef, pork or squids" (Lakoff, 2006, p. 154). Jurafsky tested and confirmed Lakoff's observations, discovering that expensive restaurants gave less choices to their customers. They were "three times less likely to talk about the diner's choice, and seven times more likely to talk about the chef's choice" (Jurafsky, 2004, p. 12).

Another interesting study about restaurant menus was conducted by linguist Mark Liberman. He applied Gricean maxims to restaurant menus. Why are certain restaurants so adamant about presenting the "real"ness of their food? If IHOP did not specify that they served *real* whipped cream, would customers think it was fake? Liberman proposed that less expensive restaurants have status anxiety, which often leads them to flout the maxim of quantity by offering too much obvious information. Expensive restaurants have a high status that is grounded on the customer's trust, one that is warranted by the high prices. On the other hand, customers at inexpensive restaurants might question how the cost of food could possibly be so low. Thus, inexpensive restaurants need to establish customer trust. Many of these restaurants overcompensate as a consequence of this perceived necessity to appease customer concerns about the authenticity of ingredients.

This study will explore the themes and theories in the literature. Though the three cited research studies present significant and valuable findings, they also leave areas for more research. The Yelp review study from Jurafsky et al. (2014) revealed that cost of dining related to language complexity in food descriptions, but not with service description. How do interactions differ across variously priced restaurants? How is service described differently? For the second study, Lakoff and Jurafsky's findings presented interesting disparities about customer autonomy, but both researchers compared different restaurant cuisines, and did not consider cultural stereotypes (would the results have changed if they surveyed an upscale Chinese

restaurant?). Culture could also be a confounding variable on its own. Perhaps in China, dishes pair better with a variety of ingredients. Maybe they value the customer's control and agency. Are the disparities in menus truly a matter of restaurant price, or could they be a result of cultural differences? Finally, Liberman's research proposed that restaurant owners may have status anxiety, but does it translate to the waitstaff? How do the servers talk about the food? Do they communicate the same need to justify what they are serving? I hypothesize that in addition to food, waitstaff behavior and linguistic framing on menus are two important contributions to an expensive dining experience. The research study tests whether variously priced restaurants differ in menu lexicon and how the waitstaff takes a customer's order.

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METHOD

Subjects

Based on Yelp's cost ratings, I selected three restaurants. In an attempt to reduce confounding variables, I used several criteria to make my choice. All restaurants had to be located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, have a burger on the menu, and offer sit-down service. With these criteria in mind, I chose Tasty Burger ($), The Automatic ($$), and Alden & Harlow ($$$). The subjects of the study were the waiters/waitresses assigned to my table at each of these three restaurants. Most demographics, such as age and socioeconomic status about these subjects were unknown. Their only identifications were sex and place of occupation. Other participants of the study included three BC students (one male and two females). These participants each attended one of the three dining sessions. Unlike the waitstaff, I studied their attitudes about the dining experience, not their language. In doing so, I was able to observe the effects of the various restaurants' linguistic differences by listening to a non-linguist's perspective.

Materials

A phone camera was used to take pictures of the menus. I recorded data with a pen and paper, filling out Table 1 and writing down any other noteworthy utterances. All participants consented to a recorded interview after the dining sessions, so I used my phone to record the audio.

Procedure

Before meeting at the restaurant, dining participants were sent the following message: "Your only task during the meal is to ask about a menu item. For example, what is this ingredient? How is this dish cooked? What do you recommend? What is the most popular dish? Does this contain dairy? After the meal, I will ask you questions about the service, so please be attentive to any positive or negative experiences you notice!"

The participant and I traveled to the restaurant together, with transportation costs paid for as compensation. Once seated at the restaurant, I photographed each page of the food and drink menus. After the waiter took the participant's order, I filled out Table 1. After each dining session, I conducted a short interview outside of the restaurant (see Appendix for questions.)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Menu items and conversational data observed between waitstaff and customer will be analyzed in terms of registers and information hierarchy.

Registers

This study did support the literature findings about customer autonomy. Tasty Burger ($) provided more customer autonomy, with options for combo meals and burger add-ons (Figure 1). On Alden & Harlow's ($$$) menu, they advertised their burger as the Secret Burger (Figure 12), with one

of the ingredients being "Your Faith," indicating the artistry and authority given to the chef. This study also supported previous research about status anxiety. The menu for Tasty Burger ($) contained a box on the menu titled "Our Story" (Figure 3) which discussed reliability of ingredients. These statements were also reiterated in abbreviated text (Figure 4) highlighted by a bright green font for anyone who ignored the body of text.

However, the findings disconfirm the theory that menu status anxiety translates to server status anxiety. Even if a menu strives to communicate that their ingredients are on-par with fine dining restaurants, the servers maintain a relaxed and casual style of speech. There were several indications of different servers using different registers. For example, servers varied in the pronunciation of "you." The Tasty Burger ($) waitress pronounced the "you" as /jʌ/. A lax vowel created a more laid-back tone of speech, hinting at a casual register. The other two restaurants used the /ju/ pronunciation, which can be found in the casual register, but also in the formal and consultative ones. These two more expensive restaurants diverged in pronunciation during drink ordering. The Automatic ($$) waitress pronounced "get you" as /gɛtʃju/, which contrasted the Alden and Harlow ($$$) pronunciation, /gɛt ju/. The combination of the two words is more characteristic of spontaneous, fluid speech, which might be found in the casual or, plausibly, the consultative register. The Alden & Harlow ($$$) waiter maintained his formal register by articulating the distinction between the two words, as well as by addressing the customers as "folks," not "guys." Since "guys" insinuates a more familiar and comfortable conversation and is technically incorrect (the literal definition of "guys" is a group of males), it might seem inappropriate for a consultative or formal register. "Folks" seems safer, perhaps because it is a more gender-inclusive term.

There were other nuances to the staff's speech. The discourse marker "like" was only prevalent in the Tasty Burger ($) waitress' speech, and only the waiter from Alden & Harlow ($$$) used formal words like "accompanied with." The diners even echoed these differences in word choice. In the post-interview with The Automatic ($$) diner, she used words like "fun" and

"creative," whereas the Alden & Harlow ($$$) diner said food was described in an "elaborate manner" and that he had a "good experience." These findings show that more expensive restaurants are related to less vernacular words in waitstaff language and reviews of service.

The distinction between Tasty Burger's ($) menu and The Automatic's ($$) menu might indicate that Jurafsky's findings about word complexity could be extended to semantical complexity. As discussed in the literature review, Jurafsky et al. (2014) reported that more expensive restaurants used longer words. The Automatic ($$) elevated the sophistication by using slang in a clever and relevant way, entering the intimate register, for example, in their Fries section of the menu (Figure 7). They used words like "freaky" and "funky," neither of which are long nor difficult to understand. However, their names for certain pairings of ingredients are innovative (marrow and meat debris certainly sound like ingredients from a concoction in a freaky horror film), and being able to appreciate them requires complex thought processes. Tasty Burger ($) attempts cleverness, referencing Parks and Recreation with dishes like "Chicky Chicky Parm Parm" (Figure 2). However, "Starvin' Student" (Figure 1) is not a clever quip or reference, and the combination of the alliteration and g-dropping seems contrived. In comparison, The Automatic ($$) dish names are more consistently playful.

Affirmative lexicon was another sign of varying registers. The affirmative words used by the more expensive restaurants had much more mobility across registers. The Tasty Burger ($) and The Automatic ($$) waitresses used "yeah," which is standard in a friendly conversation and plausible in a conversation with an employee ("yes" would be more likely used). The Automatic ($$) waitress also used other words, some overlapping with Alden & Harlow ($$$), for example, "absolutely" and "okay" with a rise at the end. Alden & Harlow ($$$) added "mmhm" to their repertoire. Tasty Burger's ($) exclusive use of "yeah" limits the waitress to the casual register. People who eat at Tasty Burger ($) know that a fast food restaurant is meant to be casual, so "yeah" is acceptable. At the other two restaurants, they may be serving customers of different backgrounds and expectations, hence the greater repertoire of affirmative words. "Absolutely," "okay," and "mmhm"

are words that could be used in friendly conversations but also at a United Nations conference.

As discussed, menus and server language indicate clear differences in register between the three restaurants. Why might this be? Why is there such a clear distinction between Tasty Burger ($) and Alden & Harlow ($$$)? One explanation might be that the waiters recognize the necessity to match who they are catering to. From eavesdropping the other diners at Alden & Harlow ($$$), I realized who I was sharing a room with. There was a businessman and his customer, both trying to make good impressions. I heard a father toast a family member; I heard two people trying to get to know each other (likely on a first date). These diners all had to speak in a consultative or formal register to achieve their goals. For businessmen and first-daters, a consultative register communicates intelligence and education. For celebrations, a toast is like a rehearsed speech. A server must act in the context of these diners; their job is to ensure that the dining experience runs smoothly. Several times throughout this dining experience, they must interrupt to take orders and serve food. If their interruptions are ridden with "yah"s and "how're ya's," it would be a more obvious and startling breach of the dining experience because their register would interject a conversation in a different register.

Information Hierarchy: Exclusivity vs. Inclusivity

Another difference between the three restaurants was the level of exclusivity. There were several ways in which Alden & Harlow ($$$) established their exclusivity and high status. When the waiter asked if we were first time diners, he insinuated that there was information an outsider would not know. The menu was also an exclusive factor. Unlike the other restaurants, there was a system to reading it. Even after the waiter explained that dishes got heavier towards the right of the menu, there was no clear demarcation of the change in heaviness factor besides the "Snacks" box (Figure 13). We would have needed to understand what ingredients like "cippolini," "halloumi," and "bacon lardon" were. However, though there is exclusivity, our first visit signaled the parting of the iron gates; once we were established

as outsiders, the waiter proceeded to share the insider information about how the restaurant operated (see "Explanation of Menu" in Table 1). Later on in the evening, he even used "hey" to address us. Though a single visit would not grant full membership because we still had many questions, the waiter was slowly ushering us into the community. The exclusivity might explain the higher price of dining; it was like paying a membership fee. Perhaps this explains the distinction between The Automatic ($$) and Alden & Harlow ($$$). On The Automatic ($$) menu, food was categorized by headings, for example: "Quick Bites" and "Bigger Plates" (Figure 8). Though The Automatic ($$) was still more exclusive in comparison to Tasty Burger ($) (for example, The Automatic ($$) menu read jalapeno molasses glaze (Figure 9), while Tasty Burger ($) simply stated bbq or tomato sauce (Figure 5)), they made an effort to make fancy feel approachable. Alden & Harlow ($$$) used farm names unknown to most people in order to elevate their dishes, for example, in Figure 14. In contrast, The Automatic ($$) used names and family titles, for example, Figure 10. While the former represented high quality and status, the latter communicated themes of solidarity and hospitality. The servers even mirrored the menus; when the Alden & Harlow ($$$) waiter presented the food, he told us what was in the dish ("bluefish, parsley remoulade, and spiralized roots") but not what was *really* in the dish. What was in the remoulade? What vegetable had been spiralized? In contrast, when we asked the Automatic ($$) waitress about the mysterious pink spread, she told us the fancy name (pomegranate mastarda), then explained what ingredients were in it and how the chef prepared it. She was also the only waitress to use "we" (see Table 1's Other Utterances). These findings parallel the literature about customer autonomy. In between customer's autonomy and chef's authority lies solidarity. Compared to Tasty Burger's ($) "it's-self-explanatory" attitude and Alden & Harlow's ($$$) "get-on-my-level" attitude, The Automatic ($$) was more about approachability and community.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study support the hypothesis that food, waiters, and menus work in conjunction to create a positive dining experience worth paying for. Diners who ate at Tasty Burger ($) and Alden & Harlow ($$$) were left slightly dissatisfied with their experiences. The Tasty Burger ($) diner felt devalued by engaging in an interaction that was casual but seemed rehearsed. The Alden & Harlow ($$$) diner felt insecure about and uncomfortable with his lack of knowledge. These feelings did not give him a curiosity or desire to attain a higher status, rather it led him to want to return to the comfort of his own status. Ultimately, what differentiated The Automatic ($$) from the other two restaurants was the environment that was shaped by language. The diner who ate at The Automatic ($$) tipped the most, not only because the food was delicious and reasonably priced, but also because of subtleties in the restaurant's language. This waitress used an intimate register, explained unfamiliar food terms, used inclusive words like "we," and employed a variety of affirmative words. The menu was a minefield of easter eggs; we spent time reading it not out of confusion but out of enjoyment. Though we felt like outsiders in a trendy dive bar, we felt accepted. When we are in public spaces, we experience the greatest desire to feel at home. The Automatic ($$) was able to achieve this homely environment with an intimate register and inclusivity.

ISSUES AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This generalizability of this study suffered from a small sample. Ideally, there would have been more restaurants tested, and more waiters tested. With a greater participant pool, there would be less confounding variables like waiter's dialect and idiolect. It also would have been beneficial to have the same diner attend three differently priced dining sessions. The diners tipped the same percentage for Tasty Burger ($) and Alden & Harlow ($$$), but based on the differences I noticed between the two restaurants, Alden & Harlow ($$$) should

have received a higher tip. I would have been able to more effectively compare the restaurants if the participants had experienced the same progression of restaurants. It also would have been helpful to control the questions asked to the wait staff and increase number of dining participants. I let the participants choose a question because I wanted to observe an organic conversation, as I believed it would lead to the most authentic information. With more participants, each person could have been assigned to one question in addition to their own question. I would then be able to compare the exact questions and responses for each server without having to sacrifice authentic data.

An interesting factor for future studies is gender of customers. While two of the diners were the same sex as me, one was male. If servers assume that the customers are on the date, would they speak differently? Would Alden & Harlow ($$$) still have used "folks?" Server language may also differ depending on the size of the group. If I had dined with a group of three, how would we have been treated differently than a pair? Or even a single diner? In the same vein, my appearance and age could have affected the results. Perhaps I would have been served differently if waitstaff had different assumptions about me. Though the field of gastrolinguistics is still mostly uncharted, the results from this study show that it is an area worth exploring.

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