

Learning to Serve: The Language and Literacy of Food Service Workers

Bitterwaitress.com is one of the newest among a burgeoning number of worker-produced websites associated with the service industry.¹ The menu on the first page of this website offers links to gossip about celebrity behavior in restaurants, gossip about chefs and restaurant owners, accounts from famous people who were once waitresses,² and customer-related horror stories. There is also a forum that includes a "hate mail" page that posts email criticisms of the website itself, as well as general criticisms of waitressing, but the criticisms are followed by rebuttals usually from past or present waitresses. Predictably, most of the criticisms either implicitly or explicitly portray waitresses as ignorant and stupid. One email respondent didn't like what he read on the customer horror story page and sent in this response:

If you find your job [as a waitress] so despicable, then go get an education and get a REAL job. You are whining about something that you can fix. Stop being such a weakling, go out and learn something, anything, and go make a real contribution to society. . . . Wait, let me guess: you do not have any marketable skills or useful knowledge, so you do what any bumbling fool can do, wait on tables. This is your own fault.

This response inspired a number of rebuttals of which the following two best summarize the overall sentiment expressed in response to the rant above. The first is from the webmaster of bitterwaitress.com:

Is it possible that I have an education, maybe I went to, oh say, Duke, and I just waitressed for some free time? Or that there are very many people in the industry who do this so that they CAN get an education? Not all of us were born with a trust fund.—There is, I might add, considerably more or less to a job than a "clear cut" salary. If you . . . live in New York, . . . you'll know that empty stores and un-crowded subways are half the reason to work at night. By the way, what are the three Leovilles? What are the two kinds of tripe? Who was Cesar Ritz' partner? What is the JavaScript for a rollover? I guess I would have to ask a bumbling fool those questions. So, tell me then.

The second is from a mother of four:

I might not have a college education, but I would love to see those so called intelligent people get a big tip out of a bad meal, or from a person who is rude and cocky just because that's the way they are—that takes talent and its not a talent you can learn at any university. So, think about it before you say, "poor girl—to dumb to get a real job. . . ."

Assumptions that waitresses (and waiters) are ignorant and stupid and that waiting on tables contributes little to society are not new. The rebuttals to commonplace, pejorative understandings of the food service industry suggest, however, that there is complexity and skill that may go unrecognized by the general public or institutions such as universities. Indeed institutions, particularly government and corporate entities in the United States, like the Bureau of Labor Statistics or the National Skills Labor Board, define waiting on tables as a low skilled profession. By defining this kind of work as low skilled, there is a concomitant implication that the more than one-third of America's workforce who do it are low skilled. *Question 1*

Service occupations, otherwise known as "in-person" services (Reich, 1992) or "interactive services" (Leidner, 1993; MacDonald and Sirianni, 1996), include any kind of work which fundamentally involves face-to-face or voice-to-voice interactions and conscious manipulation of self-presentation. As distinguished from white-collar service work, this category of "emotional proletariat" (MacDonald and Sirianni, 1996) is comprised primarily of retail sales workers, hotel workers, cashiers, house cleaners, flight attendants, taxi drivers, package delivery drivers, and waiters, among others. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (1996), one-fifth of the jobs in eating, drinking, and grocery store establishments are held by youth workers between the ages of 16 and 24. While this kind of work is traditionally assumed to be primarily a stop-gap for young workers who will later move up and on to other careers, it also involves youths who will later end up in both middle- and working-class careers. It should not be forgotten that more than two thirds of the workers involved in food service are mature adults—many or most who began their careers in the same or similar industries. Interactive service work is a significant part of the economy in the U.S. today, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that jobs will be "abundant" in this category through 2006.

Economists such as Peter Drucker (1993) suggest that interactive service workers lack the necessary education to be "knowledge" workers. These economists support general conceptions that service work is "mindless," involving routine and repetitive tasks that require little education. This orientation further suggests that these supposedly low skilled workers lack the problem identifying, problem solving, and other high level abilities needed to work in other occupations. However, relatively little specific attention and analysis have been given to the literacy skills and language abilities needed to do this work. My research investigates these issues with a focus on waiters and waitresses who work in diners. Diner restaurants are somewhat distinct from fast food or fine-dining restaurants, and they also epitomize many of the assumptions held about low skilled workplaces that require interactive services. The National Skills Standard Board, for instance, has determined that a ninth-grade level of spoken and written language use is needed to be a waiter or a waitress. Yet, how language is spoken, read, or written in a restaurant may be vastly different from how it is used in a classroom. A seemingly simple event such as taking a customer's

food order can become significantly more complex, for example, when a customer has a special request. How the waitress or waiter understands and uses texts such as the menu and how she or he "reads" and verbally interacts with the customer reflect carefully constructed uses of language and literacy.

This chapter explores these constructed ways of "reading" texts (and customers) along with the verbal, "performances" and other manipulations of self-presentation that characterize interactive service work. In line with MacDonald and Sirianni (1996), I hope this work will contribute to the development of understandings and policies that build more respect and recognition for service work to help ensure it does not become equated with servitude.

LITERACY AND CONTEMPORARY THEORY

In contrast to institutional assessments such as the National Skills Standards Board (1995), current thinking in key areas of education, sociology, anthropology and linguistics views language, literacy, and learning as embedded in social practice rather than entirely in the minds of individuals (Street, 1984; Gee, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Kress, 1993; Mahiri and Sablo, 1996; New London Group, 1996; Gee, Hull, and Lankshear, 1996). As earlier chapters in this book have noted, Gee (1991: 6) — a key proponent of this conception of literacy — explains that to be literate means to have control of "a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network.'" In a similar fashion, research work located explicitly within workplace studies proposes that literacy is "a range of practices specific to groups and individuals of different cultures, races, classes and genders" (Hull et al., 1996: 5).

In most societal institutions, however, literacy continues to be defined by considerations of achievement and by abstract, standardized tests of individual students. Also, there is a decided focus on printed texts over other mediums of communication like visual and audio. Such a focus limits our understanding of literacy in terms of its use in specific situations in multiple modes of communication. The New Literacy Studies orientation that shapes the work reported in this book argues that literacy extends beyond individual experiences of reading and writing to include the various modes of communication and situations of any socially meaningful group or network where language is used in multiple ways. The New London Group (1996), for example, claims that due to changes in the social and economic environment, schools too must begin to consider language and literacy education in terms of "multiliteracies." The concept of multiliteracies supplements traditional literacy pedagogy by addressing the multiplicity of communications channels and the increasing saliency of cultural and linguistic diversity in the world today. Central to this study is the understanding that literate acts are embedded in specific situations and that they also extend beyond the printed text involving other modes of communication including both verbal and nonverbal. In this chapter, I illustrate some-

thing of the character of literacies specific to the "social network" of waiting on tables and show how they are distinct from the conceptions of literacy commonly associated with formal education. This is not simply to suggest that there is a jargon specific to the work, which of course there is, but that there is something unique and complex about the ways waiters and waitresses in diners use language and literacy in doing their work.

METHODOLOGY

Taken together, extant New Literacies Studies research makes a formidable argument for the need to re-evaluate how we understand literacy in the workplace—particularly from the perspective of interactive service workers. The research reported here is modeled after Hull and her colleagues' groundbreaking ethnographic study of skill requirements in the factories of two different Silicon Valley computer manufacturing plants (1996). Instead of studying manufacturing plants, the larger research study I conducted and that underpins the study reported here involves two diner restaurants—one that is corporately owned and one that is privately owned. In this chapter, however, I focus only on the one that is privately owned to begin addressing the specific ways that language use and literacy practices function in this kind of workplace.

To analyze the data, I relied on some of the methodological tools from the work of Hull and her colleagues (1996). In short, I looked at patterns of thought and behavior in the setting; I identified key events taking place; I did conversational analysis of verbal interactions; and I conducted sociocultural analyses of key work events.

The data used in this chapter came from direct participation, observation, field notes, documents, interviews, tape recordings, and transcriptions, as well as from historical and bibliographic literature. I myself have been a waiter (both part-time and full-time over a ten-year period), and I was actually employed at the privately owned restaurant during my data collection period. In addition to providing important insights into worker skills, attitudes, and behaviors, my experience and positioning in this setting also enabled access to unique aspects of the work that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. The primary data considered in this chapter were collected during eight-hour periods of participant observation on Friday and/or Saturday nights in the restaurant. I chose weekend nights because they were usually the busiest times in the diner and were therefore the most challenging for the workers. Weekend shifts are also the most lucrative for the restaurant and the workers.

LOU'S RESTAURANT

Lou's Restaurant¹ is a modest, privately owned diner restaurant patterned in a style that is popular in the local region. It has an open kitchen layout with a counter where individual customers can come and sit directly in front of the

cooks' line and watch the "drama" of food service unfold while enjoying their meals. The food served at Lou's is Italian-American and it includes pastas, seafood, and a variety of sautéed or broiled poultry, beef, and veal. As is often the case with diner restaurants, Lou's has over ninety main course items, including several kinds of appetizers and salads, as well as a number of side dishes. The primary participants focused on in this chapter are three waiters at Lou's: John, Harvey, and myself.

After finishing my master's degree in English literature and deciding to move out of the state where I taught English as a Second Language at a community college, I ended up working as a waiter for two years at Lou's. This work allowed me to survive financially while further advancing my academic career. At the time I began my study at this site, the only waiter to have worked longer than two years at Lou's was John. Like myself, John began working in the restaurant business to earn extra money while in school after he had been discharged from the Marines, where he had been trained as a radio operator, telephone wireman, and Arabic translator. Two days after his honorable discharge, he started working in the restaurant that four years later would become Lou's. He subsequently has worked there for ten years. John also is the most experienced waiter at Lou's, and although the restaurant does not have an official "head" waiter, John is considered by his peers to be the expert. In an interview, he noted that it took almost ten years before he felt that he had really begun to master his craft.

Harvey might also be considered a master waiter, having been in the profession for over thirty years. However, at the beginning of the study he had been with Lou's for only two weeks. He was initially reticent to participate in the study because he said he lacked experience at this restaurant, and "didn't know the menu." Having left home when he was 14 years old to come "out West," over the years he had done a stint in the Air Force, held a position as a postal clerk, worked as a bellhop and bartender, and even had the opportunity to manage a local cafe. He decided that he did not like managerial work because he missed the freedom, autonomy, and customer interaction he had as a waiter and took a position at Lou's.

THE MENU

Harvey's concern over not knowing the menu was not surprising. The menu is the most important printed text used by waiters and waitresses, and not knowing it can dramatically affect how they are able to do their work. The menu is the key text used for most interactions with the customer, and, of course, the contents of menus vary greatly from restaurant to restaurant. But, what is a menu and what does it mean to have a literate understanding of one?

The restaurant menu is a genre unto itself. There is regularity and predictability in the conventions used such as the listing, categorizing, and pricing of individual, ready-made food items. The menu at Lou's contains ninety main

course items, as well as a variety of soups, salads, appetizers, and side dishes. In addition, there are numerous selections where, for example, many main course items offer customers a choice of their own starch item from a selection of four: spaghetti, ravioli, french fries, or a baked potato. Some of the main course items, such as sandwiches, however, only come with french fries—but if the customer prefers something such as spaghetti, or vegetables instead of fries, they can substitute another item for a small charge, although this service is not listed in the menu. In addition to the food menu, there is also a wine menu and a full service bar meaning that hard liquor is sold in this restaurant. There are twenty different kinds of wine sold by the glass and a selection of thirty-eight different kinds of wine sold by the bottle, and customers can order most other kinds of alcoholic beverages.

In one context, waitresses and waiters' knowing the meaning of the words in the menus means knowing the process of food production in the restaurant. But this meaning is generally only used when a customer has a question or special request. In such situations the meaning of the words on the page are defined more by the questions and the waiters or waitresses' understanding of specific food preparation than by any standard cookbook or dictionary. For example, the *Better Homes and Gardens New Cook Book* (1996) presents a recipe for marinara sauce calling for a thick sauce all sautéed and simmered for over thirty minutes. At Lou's, a marinara sauce is cooked in less than ten minutes and is a light tomato sauce consisting of fresh tomatoes, garlic, and parsley sautéed in olive oil. At a similar restaurant nearby—Joe's Italian Diner—marinara sauce is a seafood sauce, albeit tomato based. Someone who is familiar with Italian cooking will know that marinara sauce will have ingredients like tomatoes, olive oil, and garlic, but, in a restaurant, to have a more complete understanding of a word like *marinara* requires knowing how the kitchen prepares the dish. Clearly, the meanings of the language used in menus are socially and culturally embedded in the context of the specific situation or restaurant. To be literate here requires something other than a ninth-grade level of literacy. More than just a factual, or literal interpretation of the words on the page, it requires knowledge of specific practices—such as methods of food preparation—that take place in a particular restaurant.

On one occasion Harvey, the new but experienced waiter, asked me what “pesto” sauce was. He said that he had never come across the term before, and explained that he had never worked in an Italian restaurant and rarely eaten in one. Pesto is one of the standard sauces on the menu, and like marinara, is commonly found on the menus of many Italian-American restaurants. I explained that it comprised primarily olive oil and basil, as well as garlic, pine nuts, Parmesan cheese, and a little cream. Harvey then told me that a customer had asked him about the sauce, and since he could not explain what it was, the customer did not order it.

On another occasion a mother asked Harvey if her child could have only 20 carrots instead of the mixed vegetables as it said in the menu. Although he initially told her this was not possible, explaining that the vegetables were

premixed and that the cooks would have to pick the carrots out one by one, the mother persisted. After a few trips from the table to the cooks' line, Harvey managed to get the carrots, but the customer then declined them because everyone had finished eating. Later, I explained to Harvey that it would have been possible to go to the back of the restaurant where he could find the vegetables in various stages of preparation. While the cooks only have supplies of pre-mixed vegetables on the line, Harvey could have gone to the walk-in refrigerator and picked up an order of carrots himself to give to the cooks.

Harvey's interactions with his customers highlight how much of what he needs to know to be a good waiter is learned within the specific situations and social networks in which that knowledge is used. The instantiation of the meaning of words like *pesto* and *marinara* often occurs in the interaction between co-workers as well as with customers. Conversation becomes a necessary element in achieving an appropriately literate understanding of the menu.

Harvey's understanding and use of the menu and special requests also involves more than his knowledge of food preparation. It involves the manipulation of power and control. Sociocultural theories of literacy consider the role of power and authority in the construction of meaning (Kress, 1993). From his perspective, the order of carrots was not simply an order of carrots, but a way of positioning one's self in the interaction. The customer saw her desire for the carrots as greater than what was advertised in the menu and thus exercised authority as a customer by requesting them despite Harvey's attempt to not make the carrots an option. While such a request might seem fairly innocuous in isolation, when considered in the specific situation of Lou's at that time—that is, peak dinner hour—it becomes more complex.

Special requests and questions can extend the meaning of the menu beyond the printed page and into the conversation and interaction between the waiter or waitress and the customer. Furthermore, special requests and questions can be as varied as the individual customers themselves. The general public shares a diner restaurant menu, but it is used by each individual patron to satisfy a private appetite. How to describe something to an individual customer and satisfy their private appetite requires not only the ability to *read* the menu, but also the ability to *read* the customer. This is achieved during the process of the dinner interaction, and it includes linguistic events such as greeting the customer or taking food orders and involves both verbal and non-verbal communication. In such events the meaning of the menu is continually reconstructed in the interaction between the waitress or waiter and the individual customer, and as a text functions as a "boundary object" that coordinates the perspectives of various constituencies for a similar purpose (Star and Griesemer, 1989); in this case the satisfaction of the individual patron's appetite. The degree to which private appetite is truly satisfied is open to debate, however. Virtually everyone who has eaten at a restaurant has his or her favorite horror story about the food and/or the service, and more often than not these stories in some way involve the menu and an unfulfilled private appetite.