

In addition to being a text that is shared by the general public and used by the individual patron to satisfy a private appetite, the menu is also a text whose production of meaning results in ready-made consumable goods sold for profit. The authors of a printed menu, usually the chefs and owners of the restaurant, have their own intentions when producing the hard copy. For example, it is common practice to write long extensively itemized menus in diner restaurants like Lou's. As was pointed out earlier, Lou's menu has over ninety selections from which to choose, and many of these can be combined with a range of additional possible choices. Printing a large selection of food items gives the appearance that the customer will be able to make a personal—and *personalized*—selection from the extensive menu. In fact, it is not uncommon for patrons at Lou's to request extra time to read the menu, or ask for recommendations before making a choice. The authors of the printed menu at Lou's constructed a text that appears to be able to satisfy private appetites, but they ultimately have little control over how the patron will interpret and use the menu.

The waiters and waitresses, however, do have some control. While customers certainly have their own intentions when asking questions, waitresses and waiters have their own intentions when responding. When customers ask questions about the menu, in addition to exercising their own authority, they also introduce the opportunity for waiters and waitresses to gain control of the interaction. A good example of how this control could be manipulated by a waiter or waitress comes from Chris Fehlinger, the web-master of *bitterwaitress.com*, in an interview with *New Yorker* magazine:

"A lot of times when people asked about the menu, I would make it sound so elaborate that they would just leave it up to me," he said, "I'd describe, like, three dishes in excruciating detail, and they would just stutter, 'I, I, I can't decide, you decide for me.' So in that case, if the kitchen wants to sell fish, you're gonna have fish." He also employed what might be called a "magic words" strategy: "All you have to do is throw out certain terms, like *guanciale*, and then you throw in something like *saba*, a reduction of the unfermented must of the *Trebbiano* grape. If you mention things like that, people are just, like, 'O.K.!' " (Teicholz, 1999)

The use of linguistic devices like obfuscating descriptions and "magic words" is not unusual—particularly for waiters in fine dining restaurants. In *The World of the Waiters* (1983), Mars and Nicod examined how English waiters use devices to "get the jump" and gain control of selecting items from the menu. Their position of authority is further substantiated in fine dining restaurants by the common practice of printing menus in foreign languages, such as French, because it shifts the responsibility of food ordering from the customer, who often will not understand the language, to the waiter.

While diner restaurants generally do not print their menus in incomprehensible terms, they do, as at Lou's, tend to produce unusually long ones that can have a similar effect. But, diner menus like Lou's which offer Italian-

American cuisine do use some language that is potentially unfamiliar to the clientele (e.g., *pesto*). The combination of menu length and potentially confusing language creates frequent opportunities for waiters and waitresses to get a jump on the customer. Customers at Lou's tend to ask questions about the meaning of almost every word and phrase in the menu. Not being able to provide at least a basic description of a menu item, as shown by Harvey's unfamiliarity with *pesto*, usually results in that item not being ordered.

Knowing what a customer wants often goes beyond simply being able to describe the food. It also involves knowing which descriptions will more likely sell and requires being able to apply the menu to the specific situation. For instance, in the following transcription I approach a table to take a food order while one customer is still reading the menu (Customer 3b). She asks me to explain the difference between veal scaloppini and veal scaloppini sec.

TONY: (to Customer 3a and Customer 3b) hi

CUSTOMER 3B: what's the difference between scaloppini and scaloppini sec?

TONY: veal scaloppini is a tomato based sauce with green onions and mushrooms / veal scaloppini sec is with marsala wine green onions and mushrooms

CUSTOMER 3B: I'll have the veal scaloppini sec.

TONY: ok / would you like it with spaghetti / ravioli / french fries

CUSTOMER 3B: ravioli

CUSTOMER 3A: and / I'll get the tomato one / the veal scaloppini with mushrooms

TONY: with spaghetti / ravioli / french fries

CUSTOMER 3A: can I get steamed vegetables

TONY: you want vegetables and no starch? / it already comes with vegetables /
(.) (Customer 3a nods yes) ok / great / thank you

CUSTOMER 3A: thanks

The word *sec* functions not unlike one of Fehlinger's "magic" words. Customers who are interested in ordering veal frequently ask questions about the distinctions between the two kinds of scaloppini. I discovered over time that my description of the veal scaloppini sec almost always resulted in the customer ordering the dish. It seemed that mentioning marsala wine piqued customer interest more than tomato sauce did. One customer once quipped that marsala is a sweet wine and wanted to know why the word *sec*—meaning *dry*—was used. I replied that since no fat was used in the cooking process, it was considered "dry" cooking. In situations like this the menu is situated more in a conversational mode than a printed one. The transition from print to spoken word occurs due to the customer's inability to understand the menu, and/or satisfy his or her private appetite which results in a request for assistance. As a result the waiter or waitress can become the authority in relation to not only the printed text, but within the interaction as well. Eventually, I began to recommend this dish when customers asked for one, and the customers more often than not purchased it.

This particular food-ordering event also is interesting with regard to the customer's request for steamed vegetables. When I asked what kind of pasta she would like with her meal, she asked for steamed vegetables. The menu clearly states that vegetables are included with the meal along with the customer's choice of spaghetti, ravioli, or french fries. When she requested steamed vegetables, I simply could have arranged for her to have them and persisted in asking her which pasta she would like, but instead I anticipated that she might not want any pasta at all. I knew that, while it was not printed on the menu, the kitchen could serve her a double portion of steamed vegetables with no pasta. Most importantly, this customer's ability to order food that would satisfy her private appetite depended almost entirely upon my suggestions and understanding of the menu. Mars and Nicod (1984: 82), discussing a situation in a similar restaurant, noted a waiter who would say, "You don't really need a menu . . . I'm a 'walking menu' and I'm much better than the ordinary kind . . . I can tell you things you won't find on the menu." Examples like this illustrate not only how waitresses and waiters gain control of their interactions with customers, but also how other modes of communication—such as conversations—are used to construct complex forms of meaning around printed texts like menus. (Thus, the meaning of words in a menu are embedded in the situation, its participants, and the balance of power and authority, and this meaning manifests itself in more than one mode of communication.)

Reading menus and reading customers also involves a myriad of cultural distinctions. Although there is not the space to discuss them here, age, gender, race, and class are all relevant to interactions between customers and waiter or waitress. The argument can be made that diner restaurants like Lou's promote a friendly, family-like atmosphere. Historically diners in the U.S. have been recognized as being places where customers can find a familial environment. Popular media today support this characteristic—particularly via television—where restaurant chains explicitly advertise that their customers are treated like family, and a number of television situation comedies have long used restaurants, diners, bars, and cafés as settings where customers and employees interact in very personal and intimate ways. This cultural atmosphere can have a tremendous impact on interactions with the customers. There is sometimes miscommunication or resistance where a customer may or may not want to be treated like family, or the waitress or waiter may or may not want to treat a customer like family. At Lou's, in addition to having an intimate understanding of food production and being able to describe it to a customer in an appealing fashion, reading a menu and taking a customer's food order also requires the ability to perform these tasks in a friendly, familial manner.

The following example reveals the complexity of meanings involved in taking a customer's food order and the expression of "family." Al is a regular customer who almost always comes in by himself and sits at the counter in front of the cooks' line. He also always has the same thing to eat, a side order of spaghetti marinara, and never looks at the menu. Perhaps more important to Al

than the food he eats are the people he interacts with at Lou's. He will sit at the counter and enjoy the badinage he shares with the other customers who sit down next to him at the counter, the waitresses and waiters as they pass by his seat, and the cooks working just across the counter. On this particular evening, however, he was joined by his son, daughter-in-law, and young adult granddaughter, and rather than sitting at the counter, he sat in a large booth. Although I immediately recognized Al, I had never waited on him and his family before, and I was not sure how informal he would like the interaction to be. So I began with a fairly formal greeting saying "hello" instead of "hi" and avoided opportunities to make small talk with Al and his family:

TONY: hello::=

CUSTOMER 2D: =hello

AL: hey(.) what they put in the water? / I don't know / is it the ice or what is it?

CUSTOMER 2S: (chuckles from Customer 2d, Customer 2s, and Customer 2c)

TONY: does the water taste strange?

CUSTOMER 2S: no

TONY: do you want me to get you another water?

AL: no / I don't want any water

TONY: ok

AL: I had a couple of drinks before I came

CUSTOMER 2S: (chuckles)=

TONY: (in reference to the water tasting strange) =it could be / it could be / I don't know

CUSTOMER 2D: (to Customer 2s) are you having anything to drink?

CUSTOMER 2S: I'll have a beer / American beer / you have miller draft?

TONY: (while writing down the order) miller genuine

CUSTOMER 2D: and I'll have a tequila sunrise

AL: (to Customer 2d) what are you having?

CUSTOMER 2D: tequila sunrise

AL: oh / you should fly / you should fly

TONY: (to Customer 2a) a / you want anything?

CUSTOMER 2S: (to Customer 2a) a beer? / or anything?

AL: no / I've had too much already

CUSTOMER 2S: are you sure

CUSTOMER 2D: we'll get you a coffee later

TONY: (nod of affirmation to daughter-in-law)

AL: I've been home alone drinking

TONY: ugh ogh:/ (chuckles along with Customer 2s)

Al's comment about the water tasting funny and his drinking at home alone both provided opportunities for me to interact more intimately with Al and his family, but instead I concerned myself solely with taking their drink orders. Al's desire for me to interact in a more familial manner became more apparent when I returned to take their food order.

CUSTOMER 2D: (as the drinks are delivered) ah / great / thank you

TONY: (placing drinks in front of customers) there you go / you're welcome

AL: (to Customer 2s) so we're flying to vegas (mumbles)
 TONY: all right / you need a few minutes here?
 CUSTOMER 2S: no / (to Customer 2a) are you ready or do you want to wait?
 CUSTOMER 2D: you made up your mind yet?
 AL: (mumble) made up my mind yet
 CUSTOMER 2D: oh / ok
 TONY: al / what can I get for you?
 AL: I said I haven't made up my mind yet
 TONY: oh / ok (everyone at the table chuckles except Al)
 AL: I always have pasta you know / I would walk out there (points to the counter) the guy says / I know what you want
 TONY: ok / I'll be back in a few minutes
 CUSTOMER 2D: come back in a few minutes / thanks

While I misunderstood Al when I asked if he was ready to order, for him the greater transgression was simply asking if he was ready to order. Al expected me to know what he was going to eat because he's a regular; he's like family. He wanted a side order of spaghetti marinara and didn't want to have to speak regarding his food order. To be successful in fulfilling Al's private appetite required more than the ability to describe food according to individual customer preferences. A side order of spaghetti marinara represents not merely a food item on a menu, nor a satisfying mix of pasta and tomatoes, but also, depending on the way it is ordered and served, a gesture of friendliness: "I always have pasta you know / I would walk out there (points to the counter) the guy says / I know what you want." To be literate with a menu also means knowing when and how to express emotion (or not express emotion) to a customer through its use.

Being able to take a customer's order without him or her reading the 35 menu are important ways of expressing friendliness and family at Lou's. John, the most experienced waiter on staff, often can be found running to get an order of homemade gnocchi from the back freezer and delivering them to the cooks when they are too busy to get back there themselves. Or, he might step in behind the bar to make his own cappuccino when the bartender is busy serving other customers. On one occasion, like many others, John had a customer request a special order called *prawns romano*, a pasta dish consisting of fettuccine with prawns in a white sauce with green onions, tomatoes, and garlic. This is not listed on any menu in the restaurant, but it is something that the cooks occasionally offer as an evening special. John politely asked whether or not the cooks could accommodate his customer's request, and they complied. One can frequently hear John greeting many of his customers with some variation of, "Can I get you the usual?" Alternatively, in the case of special requests, some variant of, "That's no problem" is an often used phrase. Just like a friend for whom it would be no problem, John attempts to satisfy his customer's special requests in a similar fashion.

Yet, friendliness is often a feigned performance. Being friendly is an experiential phenomenon that is learned through participation. To be a good

waitress or waiter generally requires being able to perform friendliness under any number of circumstances. To be successful at the practice of being friendly requires performing certain techniques over and over until they can be performed on an unconscious level. Referred to as *emotional labor* (Hochschild, 1983: 6–7), this kind of work “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.” Emotional labor also is an integral part to how a waitress constructs meaning in a menu. While emotional labor may not yield the same monetary results in restaurants like Lou’s, it is still essential to the work. For example, John is masterful in the way he utilizes emotional labor. On one particularly busy evening John was trapped in a line at the bar waiting to place his drink order. He was clearly anxious, and was looking at his food order tickets to see what he needed to do next. The crowd of customers waiting to be seated spilled out of the foyer and into the aisle near where the waitresses and waiters were waiting to place their drink orders. One customer, who recognized John, caught his attention:

JOHN: hi=

CUSTOMER: =hi can I get a glass of wine

JOHN: sure (.) what do you want

CUSTOMER: are you busy

JOHN: NO (.) I got it (.) what do you want

John’s friendly “hi” and overemphatic “no” were intended to suggest to the customer that he was not busy, when he clearly was. As he later explained, he knew that the customer knew he was really busy, but he also knew that if he was friendly and accommodating, the customer probably would give him a nice tip for his trouble, which the customer did. His feigned amiability in agreeing to get the customer a drink was more or less a monetary performance. John had learned to use language for financial gain. One should not be fooled by the apparent simplicity in the preceding interaction. While it may be brief, being able to be friendly and accommodating under extreme circumstances like the “dinner rush” requires years of practice in a real work setting learning to be able to say, “hi—sure—NO, I got it.”

Although interactions with customers have been presented individually, the reality of how these events occur is quite different. Unlike fine-dining restaurants where the dinner experience can extend over a few hours, diners operate on high volume, serving to a great number of patrons in a short amount of time. George Orwell, reflecting on the difficulty involved in this work, wrote, “I calculated that [a waiter] had to walk and run about 15 miles during the day and yet the strain of the work was more mental than physical. . . . One has to leap to and fro between a multitude of jobs—it is like sorting a pack of cards against the clock” (Orwell, 1933). Because one person may be serving as many as ten tables or more at one time, the process of serving each individual table

will overlap with the others. Food orders are taken numerous times in a half-hour period during busy dinner hours at Lou's. The preceding transcriptions were taken from tape-recorded data collected on Friday evenings around 7 o'clock. My own interactions were recorded during a period when I had what is referred to as a *full station*, meaning that all of the tables under my supervision were filled with customers. By this point in the evening I had two customers at the counter, a party of four and six parties of two, for a total of eighteen customers—all of whom were in the process of ordering their meals within the same half-hour to forty-five minute period.

Literacy practices in this environment are nothing like those found in traditional classrooms, but they might be more comparable to those found in the emergency ward of a hospital or an air-traffic controller's tower. Interaction with texts and participants takes place in a rapid succession of small chunks. During the dinner hours, there are no long drawn out monologues. Time is of the essence during the busiest dinner hours for all participants involved: from the waiters and waitresses to the cooks, bartenders, and busboys. In two hundred lines of transcribed dialogue during a busy dinner period, for example, I never paused longer than thirty-nine seconds, and no participant spoke more than forty-one words in one turn. Even these pauses were usually the result of other work being completed, such as preparing a salad or waiting to order a drink. During this period, virtually all the conversation, reading, and writing were related to the immediate situational context. As this research has shown, language use was far more complex than one might assume in situations and events that involve taking a customer's food order. In addition to knowing how food is prepared, what will appeal to specific customers, and how to present this information in a friendly manner, the waiter or waitress must also remain conscious of the number of other tables waiting to have their orders taken and the amount of time that will take. Reading menus and reading customers requires the ability to think and react quickly to a multitude of almost simultaneously occurring literate events.

CONCLUSION

Menus at Lou's are texts that are catalysts for interaction between staff and customers, and their meaning is firmly embedded in this interaction. Meaning is constructed from the menu through more than one mode of communication and between a variety of participants. This process involves knowledge of food preparation, use of specific linguistic devices like magic words and other ways of describing food, the ability to read individual customers' tastes and preferences, the general expectation to perform in a friendly manner, and all during numerous virtually simultaneous and similar events. Yet, there is much left unconsidered in this chapter, particularly regarding the nature of power and

control. While waitresses and waiters are frequently able to manipulate control over customer decisions while taking a food order, this control is often tenuous and insignificant beyond the immediate interaction.

Little also has been said in this chapter about the role of management. Extensive research has already been done in the area of management control, literacy, and worker skills (Braverman, 1974; Hochschild, 1983; Kress, 1993; Leidner, 1993; Hall, 1993; Hull et al., 1996; MacDonald and Sirianni, 1996; Gee, Hull, and Lankshear, 1996). These researchers consider how literacy practices are manipulated by management to maintain control over the worker. Whether it be scientific management where workers are deskilled and routinized, or Fast Capitalism where forms of control are more insidious and shrouded in the guise of "empowering" the worker, there is little research on interactive service work beyond the fast food industry that explores how this rhetoric plays itself out in a real world situation. This leaves open to debate questions regarding the effectiveness of Fast Capitalism as a form of control over the worker. While my research has shown that waiters and waitresses can exercise some level of authority, skill, and wit through their use of language with customers, they must also interact with management and other staff where authority and control play out in different ways.

In the end, however, the customer has ultimate authority over the waiter or waitress. Diner waitressing has a long history of prejudice dating back to the beginning of the industrial revolution and involves issues of gender regarding our general perceptions and ways of interacting (Cobble, 1991; Hall, 1993). Waitressing is integrally tied to domesticated housework and likewise has historically been treated as requiring little skill or ability. In fact, the stigma of servitude that plagues waitressing and other similar kinds of work are not only the result of less than respectable treatment from management, but from customers as well. In her sociological study of diner waitresses in New Jersey, Greta Paules sums it up best:

That customers embrace the service-as-servitude metaphor is evidenced by the way they speak to and about service workers. Virtually every rule of etiquette is violated by customers in their interactions with the waitress: the waitress can be interrupted; she can be addressed with the mouth full; she can be ignored and stared at; and she can be subjected to unrestrained anger. Lacking status as a person, she, like the servant, is refused the most basic considerations of polite interaction. She is, in addition, the subject of chronic criticism. Just as in the nineteenth century servants were perceived as ignorant, slow, lazy, indifferent, and immoral (Sutherland 1981), so in the twentieth century service workers are condemned for their stupidity, apathy, slowness, incompetence, and questionable moral character. (1991:138-39)

The low status of waitressing and waitering belies the complex nature of this kind of work and the innovative and creative ways in which such workers use language.