AMERICA'S NATIONAL DISH: THE STYLE OF RESTAURANT MENUS

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A FEW YEARS AGO BBC television reporter Robert Robinson, touring the vastnesses of the United States, sampled a highly touted hamburger. "Drowned in rhetoric, the flavour dies," he mourned: "The national dish of America is menus."

INFORMATION AND ORNAMENT

The American inclination to substitute affect for content, showmanship for information, has been variously noted and lamented. Our purpose here is not merely to add to this literature; rather, we propose to examine the American restaurant menu as a genre, to show the conventions that govern its form, and to investigate the menu register as a solution to conflicts between the diverse aims of menus. Our study is based on a sample of about 200 menus (from restaurants in a variety of price ranges, offering many different sorts of food, in diverse regions of the United States and Canada)[1] and on material specifically designed to instruct restaurant owners in the writing and layout of menus (Dahl 1945, Hoke 1954, and especially Seaberg 1973), a rich source of advice and of hundreds of illustrative menus beyond our own sample.

Our study indicates that the language of American restaurant menus presents information about food, whether familiar or unfamiliar, in certain standard formats and in wording recognizable as restaurant advertising. Regional variation is negligible, and the major difference in menus from restaurants varying in price is the amount of descriptive material: some of the most expensive and some of the cheapest can dispense with the descriptions. In the following discussion, we examine the relationship between the form of menu entries and the functions they are to serve, and then we consider some specific instances of characteristic menu style.

FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION, BUT NOT VERY FAR

THE PERSISTENCE OF FORM. Virtually all modern linguistic theories recognize a fundamental distinction between the forms of language and the functions of those forms (in a variety of senses of *function*).

Partly in reaction to structuralist and generative theories of language, in which there was a strong tendency to focus on form independent of function, a variety of "functionalist" accounts have been proposed in recent years, all of them claiming to explain certain aspects of form as following from the functions served. Yet it is clear that the shape of a language cannot be predicted in full or in detail from the functions the language is called upon to serve.[2] Indeed, there seems to be some considerable tendency for form to assume a life of its own, as it were—for forms to persist whether or not they serve the functions we might suppose to have motivated them in the first place. This tendency has often been observed in the study of how perception and production affect the form of language: rules or constraints motivated by clarity in processing are sometimes grammaticized and applied even when their motivations are not relevant. Consider the constraint in English that bars deletion of the complementizer *that* for complements in subject position, presumably because such a complement without *that* would appear to constitute the main clause of the sentence and therefore mislead the hearer about the structure of the sentence:

> That he is penniless is not surprising.
> *He is penniless is not surprising.

The constraint applies, however, even when the complement is unambiguously an embedded clause. The second sentence below is ungrammatical, even though the complement clause with which it begins is not a possible main clause, as the third sentence shows.

> That he ever has a penny in his pocket is astonishing.
> *He ever has a penny in his pocket is astonishing.
> *He ever has a penny in his pocket.

REGISTERS. The foregoing remarks about form and function apply to registers as well as to the smaller constructs of linguistic analysis. To begin with, a register is a style; it has a FORMAT, which may be described (insofar as it is a matter of linguistic structure) as a set of requirements for, conditions on, or statistical favorings of particular lexical items, phonological elements, morphological shapes, syntactic constructions, or discourse structures. The format of a register may also involve other communication channels, in particular the paralinguistic and kinesic, as is obvious in one of the most studied registers, that of "baby talk" (Snow and Ferguson 1977).

A register is also situation-specific; it has a NICHE, which may be described as a set of contexts in which a particular format is appropriate.

An enormous number of dimensions may be relevant. One such dimension is the medium of communication, in particular, oral-auditory versus written-visual. Another is the number of persons addressed, in particular, one versus many. A third dimension is the relationship of the participants in space and time, for example, whether they are communicating face to face, or at one time but at some distance (as on the telephone or in live television), or at separated times (as in letters or newspaper writing). A fourth dimension covers various socially relevant attributes of the participants, for example, their ages and sexes. And a fifth is the intended effect, or the POINT, of the communication, for example, whether it is intended to inform, to cause action, to flatter, to threaten, or to awe. The question of form and function arises for registers when we ask, Why is this format associated with this niche? In particular, can we predict the format from its points and the constraints imposed by other aspects of its niche?

THE POINTS OF REGISTERS. Providing information is one of the points of a great many registers in the written-visual medium—among them, newspaper headlines, classified ads, instructions, catalog entries, and restaurant-menu entries, as can be seen in the following examples (despite their very different formats):

Stocks Reach Five-Month High During Week
IRA Deadline Nears for 35 Million
Inflation Surge Fails to Slow Buying Boom [*Columbus Dispatch,* business sec., 25 Mar. 1979]

SOLID COMFORT warm cptd. 4 br. w-applis., garage, $200. Metro-Vac (sm. fee) 268-3186.
PAINTING—Int. and ext. Reas. Call 276-7479. [*Columbus Dispatch,* 25 Mar. 1979, p. F-7]

Wash the spinach well and place in a deep saucepan. Cover and cook, without additional water, until tender, about two minutes. Remove to a wooden bowl and chop. Return to the pot.... [recipe for Danish spinach ring, *New York Times Cook Book,* p. 401][2]

Baron Kentucky Bluegrass. Vigorous, dwarf growing strain discovered in Holland. Retains its deep green color later, is tolerant of wear and sustained low cutting. Makes a fine, dense, springy turf. 1½ pounds sows 1000 square feet.... lb. $4.85; 2 lbs. $8.75.... [Geo. W. Park Seed Co. 1979 catalog, p. 54]

Wiener Schnitzel (Breaded Veal Steak, Sauted in Butter with Rolled Anchovies on a Slice of Lemon)... 3.85 [1971 menu from Old Europe restaurant, Washington, D.C.][3]

Some of these registers are also advertisements of one sort or another: they are intended to create or foster positive attitudes towards some-

thing offered, usually for sale, and to encourage people to take up the offer. Classified ads, catalog entries, and menu entries are all advertisements, whereas headlines and instructions are not.

All five of the preceding example registers are under a constraint imposed by their niches: they involve the compression of content to fit in a small space. The importance of brevity to these registers can be seen by comparing the examples to what would be said in ordinary conversation to convey the same information. All five are, in some sense, telegraphic—but the details of compression differ in each example. The classified ads use abbreviations heavily; the other examples do not. The catalog entry eliminates repeated subjects of clauses, whereas the recipe eliminates repeated objects.[4] The headlines and classified ads lack articles, though they are retained in the recipe, the catalog entry, and the menu item. The headlines are heavy in compound constructions. It is possible to argue that particular compressions are related to the requirements of each register. It does not seem possible, however, to argue that those requirements explain why further compressions do not occur in certain registers. Menus would be briefer still without their articles, yet it is odd to leave them out: "Sauted in Butter with Rolled Anchovies on Slice of Lemon."

More striking is the persistence of the format even when its cause has been removed. The need for a brevity constraint on the registers may disappear: giant menus can be printed and book-length catalogs can be composed. Yet even in them the brevity constraint tends to apply: unwieldy menus, like the 17-by-19½-inch bill of fare of the Gold Room in Tucson, contain no more entries than much more compact (6-by-9-inch and smaller) ones, like the menus of Les Copains in Toronto or Cognito's in Scottsdale, though they all follow the same format:

ENTRECÔTE AU POIVRE MADAGASCAR
Sirloin steak topped with green peppercorn, served with cream sauce and cognac [Gold Room]

ENTRECOTE GRILLÉE BEARNAISE
New York sirloin with a sauce containing shallots, tarragon, eggs, butter [Les Copains]

INTERCOSTA DI "SOPHIA"
New York Strip Sirloin, crowned with Fresh-Squeezed Orange and Lemon with a hint of Garlic [Cognito's]

Also, one aspect of a register may be very poorly served when another is in play. For instance, the brevity constraint is flouted many times when

the advertisement motive is strong. Two entries from a menu cited by Seaberg (1973, p. 212) illustrate the point:

> South African Lobster Tail... Broiled or perhaps for something different "Maine Style", breaded and then fried to the correct doneness
>
> Sauteed Shrimp in Garlic Butter... The zesty garlic butter brings out the best in this epicurean treat from the sea

In the first of these examples we see an attempt at friendly, conversational style, and in both, adjectives are used not to describe a dish but rather to advertise it: "*correct* doneness," "*zesty* garlic butter," "*epicurean* treat." Brevity would dictate the ruthless elimination of these "tasty adjectives"—but other motives encourage menu writers to pile them on.[5]

Beyond the often conflicting motives of informativeness and advertising, menus may have other points. Connoisseurship, the sharing of special knowledge about an art or craft, is certainly a point of some menus, as is evidenced by the frequent use of French in menus (examined below). Play with language is also occasionally of importance, as when items are named alliteratively (the "devil 'n dan" cocktail) or in rhyme (the "Charlie Boone in the Afternoon treat"). But the menu register is primarily directed at conveying information about dishes, advertising the dishes, and doing so in a relatively small space. The special conventions of the register serve those purposes well, though the conventions apply even when they are unnecessary.

MARKEDNESS OF REGISTERS. A striking fact about many registers, including those illustrated above, is that their forms are MARKED with respect to ordinary conversational language. The markedness of registers shows up in the fact that, whereas ordinary conversational style may be used in place of the special formats, the special formats are not equally transferable to everyday discourse. Headlines are sometimes complete sentences, as are some classified ads, instructions, and catalog descriptions. Menu entries occasionally are too:

> ENGLISH DOVER SOLE, Broiled or Saute Meuniere or Amandines... Incomparable Dover Sole has been called the wonder of the fish world. The sole served at Downing Square is snatched from British waters and cooked à la meunière—or broiled or Amandines, seasoned, and served with a delicate butter sauce—to reveal the natural flavor at its best. [Seaberg 1973, p. 49]
>
> CREPES OF THE DAY. Each day our Chef creates a filling to compliment our tender french crepes, enhanced with an outstanding Granville Inn sauce served with tossed salad. [*Cuisine Columbus,* p. 39]

On the other hand, the importation of one of the marked formats into ordinary discourse is decidedly strange. Speaking in headlines is odd; so

is telling someone to cook a chicken with the words, "Take a chicken; sauté in butter for two minutes, then heat gently in a warm oven." Similarly, when waiters are obliged to supply the contents of menu descriptions, they talk not like menus but like people. A waiter does not say,

> JUMBO FRIED SHRIMP—batter dipped Louisiana shrimp, fried golden brown, accompanied by our special sauce. [*Cuisine Columbus*, p. 68]

Rather, he says something like, "And we have jumbo fried shrimp, which are Louisiana shrimp dipped in batter, fried golden brown, and served with our special sauce." The rule is, here as elsewhere, that features of an unmarked register may be imported into a marked one, but not vice versa.

Some Details of the Menu Format

Now we turn to some of the characteristic formal features of restaurant menus.

List format. It is the nature of a menu to be a catalog, a sort of list, usually subdivided according to the traditional parts of the meal. These parts are often labeled in French (*hors d'oeuvres, entrées,* and so on), but sometimes in English (*appetizers, main dishes*) and sometimes in other languages (often with translations into English or French) or in more whimsical, thematic terms ("In the Beginning" for appetizers at Adam's Rib in Washington, or "Captain's Favorites" for the house specialties at Port O'Georgetown).

The minimal menu just lists the food categories and the names of dishes offered in each category, with their prices. Most menus, however, add some description, often designed partly to inform patrons and partly to tempt them. The informative function is served by descriptions of foreign dishes or of oddly named preparations like "Trout Meunière" or "Chicken à la Glockenspiel" (The Organ Grinder, Toronto). However, even as simple a dish as broiled calf's liver with onions may become "Broiled Slices of Fresh Baby Calf's Liver, Sauteed Onions," while fried onions turn into "Golden Fried Bermuda Onion Rings."

Past participle modifiers. Because completed preparations are being described in menus, past participles like *served, broiled,* and *marinated* are extremely common. Among participles naming modes of cooking, *broiled* and *poached* seem to occur most often. Some menu participles—*married, kissed,* and *hand-crafted,* for example—are not part of the vocabulary traditionally associated with cooking, but most are cooking words, often modified—*gently simmered, specially flavored, kettle-*

simmered, delicately broiled. Some of these participles, like *topped* and *dipped,* are characteristic of advertisements, rather than of ordinary conversation.

TASTY ADJECTIVES. Adjectives that do not refer specifically to methods of preparation are common but often uninformative. In an adjective count we made from about 100 menus, by far the most common items were *hot* and *fresh,* with *fresh* considerably in the lead. Seaberg (p. 44) commends the use of "oven-fresh rolls with creamery butter" as an appetizing presentation of "rolls and butter," a commonplace adjunct to a meal, although the descriptive words convey no information: "oven-fresh" means no more than 'not stale'; and, in this country, products without creamery connections may not legally be advertised as butter at all. Lack of space seems not to restrict the use of uninformative descriptions. One of the smallest menus in our collection (a 4¾-by-7-inch folder) gives almost no actual description of dishes but does burst into exclamations at several points, for example, "Lychee nuts . . . What a nut!"

Sweet, sour, bitter, salty, and *bland,* the most basic words to describe tastes, are generally absent, except for uses of *sweet* applied to foods which are not traditionally sweet, like lobster, and in the combination *sweet-and-sour. Tender, savory,* and *tasty,* on the other hand, are all relatively common.[6]

PLAIN ENGLISH AND FANCY FRENCH. Although the most important and obvious function of a menu is to inform, American menu writers occasionally put the whole menu in untranslated French. All-French menus are used by two restaurants in Columbus, Ohio, where the probable French-speaking clientele is not large. The primary function of such menus is apparently to impress, while the waiters take over the information function by translating and describing the menu entries. Their description is in ordinary conversational English, rather than in the menu register.

In our experience, menus with entries written in languages other than French always include translations, even where many of the restaurant's customers might be expected to be familiar with the other language. An Italian restaurant translated one item into French: "Lumache—Escargots." The use of French seems to claim culinary excellence in a way the use of other languages does not.

Because of the traditional association of French and fine food, a restaurant need not be French to use French, and the food need not be French to be named or described in French or pseudo-French. One restaurant menu offers "Cuisine de Holland." Elsewhere one might

have, for example, "Stuffed Tomato aux Herbes, Shoreham Style," "ravioli parmagiana, en casserole," or even "café American." Sometimes just a French article is enough, as in "Le Crabmeat Cocktail" and "Le Peach Melba Sundae." It need not even be the right French article, as in "Le Coupe aux Marrons Sundae."

For American writers of menu French, *le* is the unmarked article. It appears in category headings such as "Le Salade," in names of dishes such as "Le Crab Meat d'Alaska au Sherry," and in restaurant names such as "Le Gourmet Room." The preference for *le* is not entirely unwarranted, since words borrowed into French from other languages generally take the masculine gender; so "le crabmeat cocktail" is well-formed in that *cocktail* has been borrowed into French as a masculine noun. *Du jour* is a fixed phrase which is rarely translated, and *au* may occur even in names of dishes which are otherwise all in English, as in "Turtle soup au Sherry," "Split Filet of Tenderloin au Burgundy." *Au gratin* has become Americanized to the extent that it may be preposed, as in "Au Gratin Potatoes en Casserole," and *à la mode* meaning 'with ice cream' is purely American.

One word whose unmarked menu form is feminine is *petite;* several restaurant menus in our sampling offer a "Petite Filet Mignon." Perhaps the feminine is preferred because the word is customarily applied to women or to things associated with women—petite sizes for petite blondes (another word which has crossed into English in its feminine form)—and indeed the "petite" steak is popularly expected to appeal to a "petite" feminine appetite.

French words may intrude even where the menu is basically neither French nor American. One more or less Italian restaurant, for example, offers as an after-dinner drink "Cappucino Con Liqueur." Forms that are not French or Italian or American may also appear, as in a salad "Florentino," made of raw spinach.

Even where no actual French words are used, a Gallicized word order may prevail, as in "Broiled Steak Minute." A widespread convention for naming new preparations appends a proper name after the name of the principal ingredient, following the pattern of *Tournedos Rossini* or *Steak Diane.* For example, one might choose "Clams Larry" or "Baked Stuffed Lobster Larry," although the same restaurant offers, in more ordinary English, "Chef Larry's Minted Caramel Fudge Sauce."[7]

Gourmet magazine consistently follows the French naming pattern in labeling recipes sent in by its readers or requested by them, for example, "Vegetable Mélange Posvolsky" (sent in by Miriam Podiameni Posvolsky,

from Rio de Janeiro) and "Chicken Breasts with Port Sauce The Greenhouse" (from The Greenhouse restaurant).

Books of advice to restaurateurs and menu designers suggest the use of foreign languages—especially, but not exclusively, French—to "continentalize your menu" (Seaberg, p. 144). Some attempt at translation is then required. In a hastily continentalized restaurant, the foreign languages may be just trimmings, as in one where "Huitres ou moules" becomes "Austern oder muscheln" and finally "Oysters or cherrystone clams"; the monolingual American is not disappointed when the mussels turn into clams. Another restaurant offers, under the heading "Lugumbres a la carta," exactly two dishes: "Jumbo Asparagus Spears, Hollandaise" and "Large Idaho Baked Potato." A third suggests "Flaming Coffee Diablo, Prepared en Vue of Guest." The result of serious continentalization is a macaronic menu.

Translation leads to a number of complexities. Sometimes a genuinely foreign restaurant may give "English" translations or descriptions that are less than illuminating, as does the Chinese restaurant offering lobster served "with countless freshes." Sometimes non-English words are taken over into what are otherwise translations into English, as in "Petites Native Frog Legs Provencale served with Concasseed Tomatoes, touch of Garlic and Spicy Butter." Occasionally something that looks like a misleading translation is a genuinely helpful piece of information, as on the menu which lists "Greek coffee (Turkish)." One Chinese menu "translates" "Chicken with mushrooms" as "(moo goo gai pan)"—which looks almost like translating English into Chinese, although the latter term is a lexical item that has become sufficiently Americanized to appear in *The American Heritage Dictionary.*

Conclusion

We have argued that menus have a conventionalized format, one marked with respect to ordinary conversational language. Menus supply their information in a list of noun phrases, heavy with modifying past participles like *topped, dipped,* and *garlic-accented,* often macaronic, and larded with appealing adjectives like *rich, crisp, special, choice, generous, natural, zesty,* and of course *fresh.*[8] Thus are the practical aims of informativeness and brevity served along with the ornamental aims of advertisement, connoisseurship, and play. As Julia Child would say: Bon appétit!

Notes

1. We are indebted to Ellen Kaisse, Mary Ritchie Key, Adrienne and Keith Lehrer, Mary and Peter Salus, and Jacqueline and Paul Schachter for collecting menus for us. Our sample is composed of their contributions, some we collected ourselves, and the menus in two compendia, *Capital Feasts* (Washington, D.C.: Rock Creek Publishing Co., 1971) and *Cuisine Columbus* (Columbus, Ohio: Judy Gile, 1977).

2. Fodor (1978, pp. 468-72) discusses the degree to which constraints on transformations can be said to be determined by performance mechanisms.

3. All our examples and quotations from menus are cited with the capitalization, spelling, and punctuation of the originals.

4. Sadock (1974) discusses some format peculiarities of instructions in medicine-bottle directions, signs, recipes, and the like.

5. The classified ads cited above illustrate a similar point. Despite their compressed format, both include uninformative advertising words: "warm" in the first, "reas[onable]" in the second.

6. Donald Churma tells us that one fast-food chain obliges its employees to announce orders with fixed expressions using tasty adjectives: not "an order of fries," but "one order of golden-brown french fries"; not "one milk," but "one ice-cold white milk."

7. "Clams Larry" are not further described, in contrast with the minted caramel fudge sauce, and the only function of the proper name seems to be to suggest that these clams are special in an unspecified way.

8. It will be obvious from the examples we have given that a characteristic visual feature of the menu register is its use of capitalization. Unfortunately, we have not been able to interpret the diverse systems of capitalization that appear in our sample menus: some use no upper case, some use it for emphasis, some use it as in titles, some appear to sprinkle it randomly through the menu descriptions. Other visual features—in particular, line division, spacing, punctuation, spelling, and choice of type face—also present intriguing problems to the analyst.

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