

A Corpus Approach to Discourse Analysis of Newspaper Restaurant Reviews: A Preliminary Analysis

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Abstract

This study is a corpus-based discourse analysis that explores specific discourse communities of restaurant reviews in newspapers. The design of this study is largely influenced by the works of Swales (1990), Bhatia (1993), and Biber *et al.* (2007), and is guided by understanding how a professional text in a particular discipline achieves its disciplinary objectives. A specialized corpus was constructed and the data were randomly selected from restaurant reviews from five leading newspapers in US in 2010. The analyses focused on the distributions and functions of surface linguistic features including move analyses, analyses of communicative purposes in the texts, and investigations of the vocabulary and typical lexicogrammatical realizations of these moves. The results have shown that the establishment of the dining experience (Move 3) (46.3%) occurred most frequently, followed by a description of the entering (Move 2) (22.0%), and then a detailed description of the chosen restaurant (Move 1) (14.7%). Most reviews were structured chronologically and were similarly arranged in the following order: experience of choice, entering, dining, paying, and consideration of another visit. In addition, some rhetorical signals were noticed. The implications of the findings are presented with possible suggestions for future teaching and research issues.

Key words: Corpus; Discourse analysis; Restaurant review

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INTRODUCTION

Food related topics have become important aspect in our daily lives. The discourse that surrounds food and cooking pervades everyday communication among friends, family, and co-workers. Another social-media trend for the new food culture is a shift to restaurant-going from an occasional leisure-time activity to the center-stage feature of our daily lives. According to a digital survey that was conducted in US in 2012 regarding how restaurant-goers choose restaurants showed that 52% of the respondents reported dining out between 2 and 4 times per week (Angelsmith News Blog, 2012). For many young people, especially for those living in metropolitan areas, dining out has become a trend that relies on restaurant reviews to tell them about the latest hot spots. As the US National Restaurant Association's (NRA) data (2012) presented, 92% of adults indicate that they enjoy going to restaurants and 41% of adults indicate restaurants are an essential part of their lifestyle.

Restaurant reviews are instrumental in providing information on unfamiliar or overlooked cuisines. They help determine dining decisions and restaurateurs believe in the power of restaurant reviews to affect their sales positively or negatively (Moir, 2007). According to the 2005 Editor & Publisher International Year Book in the US, 58.4% of the nation's approximately 1,450 daily newspapers published a stand-alone food section, typically once a week, and more than 50 million adults were regular readers of food sections (Lallande, 2005). According to a

survey of 2,000 customers (Druce, 2010), more than half (58%) of those surveyed said that if they saw a bad review for a restaurant, then they would likely to avoid it with just 20% indicating they would ignore the reviewer and trust their own judgment based on the restaurant's website and menu. Dornenburg and Page (1998) mentioned the influence of restaurant reviews, "they help to determine what we as a nation value in dining out" and for readers the reviews are an important source of restaurant information (p. xvii). In addition, unlike the effects of other critical practices such as film or theatre reviews, the effect of restaurant reviews can last for years, even though there may have been changes in the restaurant's kitchen, menu, or ownership (Grindy, 1998). As Dornenburg and Page (1998) stated, "stories of negative review closing down restaurants are legendary in every city" (p. 125). As a result, restaurant reviews exert powerful influences for restaurant owners and for customers in different but dramatic ways.

From teaching perspective, restaurant reviews can be authentic English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teaching material for college students, especially for Food and Beverage Management majors or Culinary Arts majors. The topics related to food and restaurants always attract student attention and interest. Students in Food and Beverage Management or in the Culinary Arts can learn the latest trends and current knowledge related to diets and restaurant management issues by reading current restaurant reviews in leading newspapers or magazines. It will surely enhance their professional knowledge in English. Restaurant reviews in newspapers, however, have not received attention in academic discourse. There has been no scholastic investigation into ESP/EAP research that has focused on the analysis of restaurant reviews and their implication as teaching tools. A few studies have analyzed restaurant reviews from a social or communicative perspective, including the content analysis, the influence on consumer behavior, and decision-making processes (Barrows, Lattuca, & Bosselman, 1989; Schoeder, 1985; Titz, Lanza-Abbott, & Cruz, 2004). This research did not focus on linguistic consideration within the reviews themselves, the actual media messages about and by which interested parties form opinions, preferences, and beliefs. Based on above reasons and issues, this study attempts to add to the understanding of how newspaper restaurant reviews operate by analyzing the linguistics aspects of the reviews themselves and explores how communicative purposes are achieved journalistically from the performance of one particular discourse, i.e. restaurant reviews in newspapers. Based on the research results, this research will produce useful information for future ESP teaching and research.

The analytical approach chosen for this study is based on the ideas of genre in the tradition of Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993), and of discourse community of Bibler *et al.* (2007). A specialized corpus by collecting restaurant review articles from leading newspapers in US is

constructed. The corpus-based linguistic analyses focus on the distribution and function of surface linguistic features including move analyses, analyses of communicative purposes in texts, investigations of the vocabulary, and typical lexico-grammatical realizations of these moves. Based on the results, ESP teaching implications and suggestions for future research are made.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on the objectives of this study, the issues discussed in this section are the role of critics and restaurant reviews in newspapers. Important definitions and important research results are presented as well.

1.1 Role of Restaurant Critics

There are different paths to becoming a professional reviewer. Guensburg (1999) noted that while some critics acquire knowledge from cooking classes or travel, others have worked in various restaurant industry positions. Walkup (2004) believed that knowledge of food and wine should be a prerequisite for restaurant reviewers. Ruggless (1993) mentioned that most reviewers are journalists/writers first and reviewers second, and that reviewing are merely a type of culinary reporting. Chalmers (2007) also stated a degree from a professional culinary institution needs to be a minimum requirement for restaurant critics and at least 10-years of experience solely devoted to eating should also be part of the job description.

Bill Rice, the restaurant critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, shares his experience and explains, "A restaurant critic is a consumer advocate. His role is to provide the reader with a second hand experience before going for a firsthand one." (Chalmers, 2007, p. 38). Chalmers (2007) described the work content of a reviewer, she says most of the top critics acknowledge that they spend a minimum of 30-hours a week eating, which is nearly a full-time job; and the rest of the time is spent writing. In addition, reviewers need to go back to restaurants two or three times before writing a full review (Walkup, 2004). According to Titz *et al.* (2004), critics made an average of 2.6 visits and sampled a minimum of four entrees prior to writing a review and negative reviews were only written after multiple visits. Some critics reported direct pressure from restaurants and indirect pressure from the newspaper-advertising departments (Schroeder, 1985). Sometimes, critics even face lawsuits (Frumkin, 2007)

1.2 Restaurant Reviews in Newspapers

Restaurant reviews, with the focus on restaurant evaluation and business-to-consumer orientation, contain certain conventions that render them easy to be recognized as restaurant reviews. These conventions assume a unique status in our daily lives for restaurant reviews. The American of Food Journalists (AFJ) (2001) has codified some general criteria on which reviews should be carried

out. These standards are echoed throughout restaurant industry literature. Reviewers should eat anonymously, a requirement that dates to the foundations of the discipline and described at length by Richards (2001). According to the AFJ (2001), reviewers should never accept meals, should visit restaurants at least twice before writing an assessment, and should sample a full range of items on the menu. Reviewers must also follow basic ethical journalistic tenets that cover accuracy, fairness, and consistency. Schroeder's (1985) survey found that restaurant reviewers believed they usually follow these tenets.

Restaurant reviewing, as with all the critical arts, is subjective (Sanson, 1990). As Schroeder (1985) stated, reviewers group their judgments into the categories of food, service, and environment with food being the most important category. Within these groupings, everything is fair game for critical assessment. Rohr (1993) interviewed food critics from 10 of America's largest circulated newspapers for what is perhaps the most extensive consideration of restaurant review criteria to appear in the industry literature. Rohr found that while food quality determined the direction of most reviews, reviewers interpreted three general critical indicia of food, service, and environment in different ways. For examples, some critics enjoy low lighting and extremely comfortable furniture, while others appreciate soft music or conversational hum (Rohr, 1993). Some reviewers look for casual, friendly greetings, while others dislike servers who introduce themselves, while still others pay attention to service because they have well-known faces (Rohr, 1993). In addition, in Tits *et al.* study (2004), through the content analysis of newspaper restaurant reviews from five US cities, showed that critics focused their comments on quality of food, ambience, and atmosphere. Service and price were reflected in symbolized scales accompanying many reviews. When an exception occurred during the dining experience, the critic would discuss price, service, and other exceptions to their expectations.

John Mariana (2000) summarized his critical criteria, most of which are common to restaurant reviewers across America:

- (1) Food that is novel for its own sake is unimportant.
- (2) Restaurants should, within their own context, pay as much attention as is practical to food, service, and environment.
- (3) Service should be personal and professional – neither too formal nor too casual.
- (4) Decorations should be tasteful, as well as appropriate to the mission of the restaurant and the food being served.
- (5) Meal prices should reflect the context of the restaurant, the ingredients, and preparation techniques for all courses.
- (6) Wine lists should be well selected and appropriate to the food service.
- (7) From the soup course to the cheese course,

restaurants should consistently produce pleasing dishes.

As mentioned earlier, in contrast to the trade literature, the scholarly literature on restaurants reviews is comprised of only Barrows *et al.* (1989) and Schroeder (1985). Their studies are primarily sociological perspectives. Barrows *et al.* (1989) surveyed 420 people on a college campus to assess the degree to which negative or positive reviews affected their dining decisions. Schroeder (1985) surveyed reviewers to discover their beliefs regarding how they did their jobs. What these investigations all lacked was a substantive consideration of the reviews themselves, their linguistic features, and the actual media messages about and through which interested parties formed opinions, preferences, and beliefs.

2. MEHTODOLOGY

This study seeks to understand the surface linguistic features of restaurant reviews in newspapers by using the move analyses, analyses of communicative purposes in texts, investigations of vocabulary, and typical lexicogrammatical realizations of these moves. To reach those goals, a specialized corpus was constructed. Move-based analysis frameworks developed by Swales (1990), Bhatia (1993) and Bibler *et al.* (BCU Approach) (2007) were adapted. Software packages including SPSS 14.0, Antconc 3.2, and Wordsmith 5.0 were used to conduct move analyses, vocabulary frequencies, frequency of word combination, structure, and format.

2.1 Corpus Collection

A review is defined as the formal and critical evaluation of a single restaurant's food, service, environment, or any combination published in the ordinary course of business for a newspaper (Dornenburg & Page, 1998) in its main edition. In most newspapers, formal restaurant reviews are clearly labeled as such, usually appear weekly or bi-monthly on the same day of the week, and is often accompanied by a rating system (e.g. stars, spoons, chef's toques) (Dornenburg & Page, 1998). For newspapers that published assessments of restaurants with and without rating systems, these assessments with rating systems are considered reviews because they are traditionally one of the chief components of culinary criticism.

A large-circulation daily newspaper is defined as a newspaper delivered each weekday within an audited circulation of more than 250,000 in 2010 as reported by the Newspaper Association of America (NAA). The review articles chosen in this study were from the category of large-circulation daily newspapers. These newspapers were the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Houston Chronicle*, and the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. The restaurant reviews included in this study had to satisfy the above criterion of definitions for restaurants review texts. For example, in the *New York Times* there is a "Restaurant Review"

section published every Wednesday, and in the *Los Angeles Times*, these articles are published under the title of “The Review” every Thursday. Restaurant review articles in these newspapers were about 850 to 1,300 words per article. Under the selection criteria mentioned above, three reviews were randomly selected from each newspaper from January 1, 2010 to December 31, 2010. For this specialized corpus, there are 15 articles with a total of 17,068 words.

2.2 Move Analysis

Based on the *BCU Approach* (Biber Connor Upton Approach) for move analysis (Upton & Cohen, 2009), an analytical framework (Table 1) was proposed. This framework is used as a coding scheme for move analysis. In this framework, there were five moves and several steps within some moves. Two inter-raters, a faculty member from the English department and a graduate student who has majored in translation and has trained in move analysis, participated in the analysis with an inter-rater reliability of 92.4%.

Table 1
The Coding Protocol of Move Type in Newspaper Restaurant Reviews

Move 1	Detailed descriptions of the chosen restaurant Step 1a: introduce the chef’s/owner’s experience Step 1b: introduce what was in this space before Step 1c: introduce the neighborhood/location Step 1d: introduce the history of the restaurant
Move 2	Description of entering Step 2a: getting a reservation Step 2b: check out the façade Step 2c: describe the ambience: music, décor, lighting, crowd, etc. Step 2d: discuss the service while entering Step 2e: describe the menu
Move 3	Establish the dining experience Step 3a: describe the food – appetizers, entrees, desserts (integrated with price, value, presentation, preparation, freshness, variety, and originality) Step 3b: mention other meals served
Move 4	Mention unpleasant experiences
Move 5	Wrap up

3. RESULTS

The present study integrated discourse analysis with corpus-based text analysis to explore how restaurant reviews are realized in newspapers. This was used to examine the organization structure of the review texts to identify common moves and move structures used to present the information to readers and further investigated the linguistic features of these moves by compiling a specialized corpus and using software for a more quantitative analysis of the texts.

3.1 Structure and Format

The communicative purpose of a restaurant review is to inform the public of the type of food and standards they can expect at a given eating establishment. The readers

expect to feel like they have experienced the restaurant themselves and they also anticipate the reviewer would provide opinions of whether they should go to this particular restaurant.

Unlike academic writing, the thesis statement of a restaurant review article is not clearly stated, indirect, and not positioned. It may appear anywhere or it may be metaphorically phrased. Almost all reviews are structured chronologically and are similarly arranged in the order of the experience for choice, entrance, dining, paying, and consideration for another visit.

Each review article comes with a heading. Among the 15 articles, over half (53.3%) of the article headings or subheadings show the name of the reviewed restaurant. All of the rating systems in these five selected newspapers have adopted the American of Food Journalists’ Food Critics’ guidelines by using the 4-star system. In most of the newspaper, except for the *Houston Chronicle*, the results of the rated stars are usually shown at the end of the article with some other basic information about the restaurant. Except for the main text part of the review, reviewers usually make comments or provide extra information about the restaurant in short phrases in specific categories at the end of the article. These categories include: hours, website, location, atmosphere and service, recommended dishes, wine list, price range, reservation, and noise. Among these five newspapers, the *New York Times*’ reviews provided descriptions in more categories in this section including credit cards accepted and wheelchair access. All the newspapers’ reviews explained the meaning of the stars mean in this section.

3.2 Move Analysis

Table 2
Frequency of Moves from 60 Newspaper Restaurant Reviews

Move 1	Detailed descriptions of the chosen restaurant	14.7%
	Step 1a: introduce the chef’s/owner’s experience	4.2%
	Step 1b: introduce what was in this space	2.1%
	Step 1c: introduce the neighborhood/location	2.1%
	Step 1d: introduce the history of the restaurant	6.3%
Move 2	Describing of entering	22.0%
	Step 2a: get a reservations	1.0%
	Step 2b: check out the façade	1.0%
	Step 2c: describe the ambience: music, décor, lighting, crowd, etc.	8.5%
	Step 2d: discuss the service while entering	1.0%
	Step 2e: describe the menu	10.5%
Move 3	Establish the dining experience	46.3%
	Step 3a: describe the food – appetizers, entrees, desserts (integrate with price, value, presentation, preparation, freshness, variety, originality)	44.2%
	Step 3b: mentioning other meals served	2.1%
Move 4	Mention unpleasant experience	9.6%
Move 5	Wrap up	7.4%

First, it is necessary to identify and count the occurrences of the moves to investigate how restaurant reviews are presented in moves. Table 2 shows the results of the move analysis of the 15 articles. We observed that Move 3 (46.3%) occurred most frequently, followed by

Move 2 (22.0%), and then Move 1 (14.7%). As Jacob (2010) mentioned, while writing restaurant reviews, “Questions about food are paramount”. As a result, Move 3 occurred most frequently. Taking a closer look at the steps, the top high-frequency steps were steps 3a, 2e, and 2c. The results are consistent with Titz *et al.* (2004), which showed that critics primarily focused their comments on the quality of food, menu, and ambience.

3.3 Rhetorical Signals

While analyzing the moves, some rhetorical signals were also noticed. First, while providing evidence, the details described by the reviewer are as concrete as possible and in response on a tactile sensation or a specific flavor over empty adjective use such as “delicious”, “amazing”, or “savory”. When possible, cite as many prominent ingredients as possible. This way, the audience felt like they know the dish, instead of simply relying on taste, which is subjective. Second, for writing style, the reviews show just a little of the personality of the reviewer. Third, the reviewers try to pass the information to the audience as if they are experiencing the restaurant first-hand and not by telling a story. Therefore, the reviewer is as invisible as possible. The reviewer narrates a particular experience only if it is crucial or if the experience is unique to a specific incident. Fourth, most of the reviews are written in present tense. Past tense is only to narrate rare experiences when the reviewers become more visible.

3.4 Sentence Style and Word Choice

The average length of sentences in the corpus as calculated using *WordSmith Tools*. The average sentence lengths were 19.21 words. In Pollach (2006) product review articles analysis, online product review article sentence lengths were 17.4 words. Compared with product review articles, restaurant reviews in newspapers use longer sentences. This may be the case because they are written by professional writers and they are written specifically for the hard copy publication. On the other hand, online product reviews are not written by professional writers and people often use simpler structures or do not even write in complete sentences for internet articles.

To study the distribution of words in the corpus, the *Lexical Tutor* software was used to analyze quantitative outcomes. In general, a high lexical density indicator suggested that the vocabulary used is heterogeneous, where a low lexical density indicator meant that a corpus is not lexically rich. In the restaurant review corpus, lexical density was 0.61, which is higher than for baseball game reviews in newspapers (0.53) (Li & Hou, 2010). In contrast, the restaurant review corpus covered a broader variety of topics and, thus, contained greater lexical variety.

Table 3
Profile of the Corpus

Category	
Number of Text	15
Word in Text (Token)	17,068
Different Words (Types)	44,94
Lexical Density (content word/total)	0.61

3.5 Vocabulary Level

Helping L2 learners for studying in English-medium institutions or for advancing their occupational skills by facilitating vocabulary acquisition is a major concentration in EAP/EOP teaching and research. Recently, researchers have identified three types of words. They are (a) the 1,000 and 2,000 most frequent words in English (K1 & K2 Words), as compiled by West (1953) and commonly referred to as the General Service List (GSL); (b) academic words; and (c) specialized vocabulary (also referred to as technical vocabulary in the literature). A 570-word Academic Word List (AWL) was compiled by Coxhead (2000). From the *Lexical Tutor* analysis (Table 4), this specialized corpus consists of 64.74% of K1 words, 9.72% of K2 words, 2.33% of AWL words, and 23.21% specialized vocabulary. Since most of the words belong to the K1 words, restaurant review articles in newspapers should be easier for students to read. In addition, 23.21% of the words were specialized vocabulary and are authentic materials for student ESP learning.

Table 4
Vocabulary Level in the Corpus

	Tokens	%
K1 Words (1-1000)	11,050	64.74
Function Words	6,704	39.28
Content Words	4,346	25.46
K2 Words (1001-2000)	1,659	9.72
AWL Words (Academic)	398	2.33
Off-List Words	3,961	23.21
Total	17,068	100

3.6 Word Frequencies

A frequency analysis was performed, looking at the 100 most frequent content words in the corpus. The 100 most frequent words, which occurred from 9 to 48 times, were grouped into 6 categories according to their meaning. Table 5 shows for each category the number of different words and the three most frequent words.

Table 5
The 100 Most Frequent Words

Category	Types	Top three
Verbs	21	like, served, come
Nouns	23	Food, bar, room
Number	3	one, two, both
emphasis	6	too, also, very
Adverbs	16	Just, first, along
Adjective	31	sweet, more, all
Total	100	

Clearly, adjectives with general meanings make up the largest proportion in terms of word types. In addition, nouns, verbs, and adverbs play an important role in restaurant reviews.

CONCLUSIONS

Analyses in this study were based on the construction of a specialized corpus. Move analysis and linguistic features of the corpus can be used for pedagogical purposes since the data were based on authentic materials. The results of this study can help teachers and learners understand the professional genre in food industry. For instructors, to indicate the common or obligatory rhetorical moves and linguistic features that are specifically pinpointed and these features are explicitly taught. Course materials may include restaurant reviews from newspapers as samples to be analyzed with a move structure focus. Restaurant review articles in newspapers can be used as teaching materials for ESP reading, writing, vocabulary, and cultural issue. Though instructors may not specialize in the academic disciplines of the learners, they could provide learners with materials, such as frequency lists of verb, nouns, or specialized words.

For future research, more samples of review articles from newspapers could be collected to expand the size of the specialized corpus. In addition, comparison of restaurant reviews of native speakers (English) and non-native speakers (Mandarin) may further reveal the difference between them; thereby, providing helpful suggestions for enhancing food and cultural understanding, curriculum design, and materials development.

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