

Linguistic identity construction in restaurant customer service narratives

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This paper presents a computationally-aided qualitative analysis of identity construction through sociolinguistic phenomena, and narrative practice in posts and comments from an online forum for sharing narratives about restaurant service work. Since March 2020, the already-difficult working conditions of restaurant service workers, including customer abuse (Korczynski & Evans 2013), low wages and wage theft (Bobo 2014), and sexual harassment (One Fair Wage 2020; Rodriguez et al. 2014), have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Servers' work necessarily involves close proximity to unmasked diners, and who have been tasked with enforcing safety regulations on the very customers they rely on for tips. A well-documented means of dealing with negative feelings associated with the emotional challenges of service work is formation of "communities of coping" (Korczynski 2003): workers vent to their colleagues about negative customer interactions in order to process their emotions and move past them.

The Reddit forum /r/TalesFromYourServer (TFYS), where (primarily American) food service workers post and comment on narratives about experiences they have at work, often involving interactions or conflicts with customers, is an online means of fulfilling this need. I analyze the set of narratives posted on TFYS between March 2020 and August 2021: 7570 posts and 75 162 comments, approximately 5.4 million words in total. Because a comprehensive analysis of a dataset of this size by manual means is infeasible, I use latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA; see Blei, Ng, & Jordan 2003), a topic modelling technique, to sample a subset of posts for analysis. The LDA algorithm categorizes posts into underlying 'topics' based on the lexical items present in each post; I sample posts from these topics to ensure my qualitative analysis accounts for posts associated with a broad range of content and narrative types.

The narratives analyzed are a source of several interesting narrative and sociolinguistic phenomena, such as the differential styling of reported speech and free indirect discourse to highlight the contrast between what the narrator said in reality and how they actually felt about it. This allows the construction of dual positions (Schiffrin 1996: 198) and nuanced identities: when telling a story about dealing with an abusive customer, the narrator might linguistically present themselves both as a competent and professional server in the moment, by using honorific terms of address and other politeness markers, while in the narration using expressives (Potts 2007) that indicate antipathy toward the customer who is disrespecting or abusing them. An example dialogue from one such story is shown in (1), where the server addresses their customer (whom they refer to as 'Karen' in a nod to an Internet meme) as *ma'am* in the dialogue, but disparages her in the narration, referring to her finger as *her long witch finger*.

- (1) Karen: No, I want someone else to boil these again for me!
Me: Wait, ma'am, why can't I do that for you?
Karen: Because you're still in training. I'll bet you've only been working here for a week, and the only thing they've taught you is how to say yes ma'am, yes sir. *points her long witch finger at my name tag*

Individually, these stories provide a means for users to express themselves vent their frustrations to an empathetic community. I argue that the linguistic practices employed in these narratives can also be viewed as part of a project of collective identity construction, achieved by curation features of the Reddit software (such as voting posts 'up' or 'down' to highlight stories that resonate), as well as by collective narrative practices like the sharing of 'second stories' (Sacks 1992) in the comment section that emphasize or build on themes of the original poster's narrative. The result is a representation of servers not as willing and passive servants, but as savvy professionals who take on a given persona for their own ends.

References

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