

Barista Lexicon and Its Effect on Customer Interactions

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The work of a barista, like many other vocations, relies heavily on the art of rhetoric and literacy in order for the individual to do their job successfully. Research regarding the use of rhetoric and language literacy in the workplace has been widely conducted over the years. Some of the most famous contributors among many are Tony Mirabelli, John Swales, and Perri Klass. Research indicates that rhetoric and language are specific to each discourse community, and are therefore not meant to be understood by nonmembers outside of the group. Tony Mirabelli, in his article “Learning to Serve: The Language and Literacy of Food Service Workers,” explains “I illustrate something 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 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 during their work” (146). Language and literacy are important in all aspects of life but take on another identity and role that is specific to the workplace. While discussing how certain terms and words may mean one thing to a customer and an entirely different thing to the waiters and waitresses, Mirabelli

goes on to clarify, “To be literate here (in the diner regarding the understanding of the word *marinara*) 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” (150). This is clearly seen in the barista discourse community, though it is paid almost no attention.

In this essay I will argue that barista lexicon influences customer interactions in three major ways; firstly, by creating a barrier between the two, secondly, by enhancing customer experience, and thirdly, by providing a learning experience. I will argue this through the analysis of barista interviews, surveys, and observations of such interactions as well as the analysis of existing research on related subjects. This argument is significant to the rhetoric and language literacy discussion because barista-customer interactions are so commonplace (happening on a daily basis), yet very little attention and research has been conducted on the subject. The closest research to this specific subject has been conducted on food service workers, most of them restaurant workers; however, the amount of research that has been focused on the language and literacies of baristas is seriously lacking.

The purpose of this essay is to expand the research on barista discourse communities and their use of rhetoric and language literacy as well as to pave the way for future research and analysis of the barista discourse community as a whole. I will achieve this by first discussing the methods of research followed by a discussion of the results. I will conclude with the overall findings by summarizing the argument that barista

lexicon influences customer interactions by creating a barrier between barista and customer, enhancing customer experience, and providing a learning experience, both for the barista and the customer.

Methods

Throughout the course of research acquisition, I used several methods of gathering information. The first and most common method of primary research that will show up frequently in this article is observation. I relied heavily on observation in conducting my research because I felt as though that would result in the most accurate and relevant information. Observations provided me with real data and real examples in real time and allowed me to see firsthand numerous barista-customer interactions, both between myself and customers, and my fellow coworkers and customers. The second method of research that I employed was the use of surveys and interview questions. This method will be referred to less frequently than my observations, merely because I felt that my observations provided more accurate insight for my research question than asking baristas questions in which they had to rely on memory. Although I ended up focusing more on the observations, the survey and interview questions were helpful in comparing baristas' experiences with how they felt that the barista lexicon influenced them. I will analyze the results of each of these methods by explaining what they mean, connecting those findings with the findings of previous research, and comparing and contrasting how rhetoric and language literacy affects worker-customer interactions within barista discourse communities and other food service discourse communities alike.

Results and Discussion

Collectively, the results obtained from my interviews, observations, and surveys were all very similar to each other. I created a survey that collected responses on topics ranging from years of experience to the number of barista terms that the responders knew before becoming a barista, as well as responses detailing how they use communication and how barista lexicon affects customer interactions. When asked, “What are the language barriers that you have found that are present when communicating with customers? Provide as many examples of your experience with this as possible. How do/did you overcome those barriers?” (Appendix A), many survey participants answered that customers are often unfamiliar with the drink terminology and the differences between drinks, such as lattes and breves. I have witnessed this disconnect firsthand when a customer says that they would just like an iced coffee. To a barista, that could mean a multitude of drinks. It could mean an iced Americano, latte, breve, cold brew, Macchiato, or just plain espresso shots over ice. In order to get to the bottom of what the customer actually intends to order, baristas must be able to communicate effectively the differences between the drinks in a way that is easy to understand for someone that does not have any training or experience working as a barista. Due to the unfamiliarity with barista lexicon, we also encounter customers that misuse the terminology and order a drink that ends up being completely different than what they actually want. We have one customer, in particular, that comes in regularly and orders a cappuccino when what she really wants is a latte with latte art. A cappuccino differs from a latte in that a latte is just milk, shots, and flavoring. A cappuccino is a latte

with foam. Cappuccinos can either be wet or dry, meaning that the former is half steamed milk and half foam and the latter is all foam. Just the other day, one of our newer employees took her order and put the order in as a cappuccino because she was unaware that the customer actually meant to order a latte. The customer's lack of familiarity with barista lexicon might have led to her drink being made correctly according to what she ordered but incorrectly according to what she wanted had I not recognized the customer and explained the situation to my coworker. These kinds of miscommunications happen daily and as a barista it is important to be well versed in both barista lexicon and also how that lexicon would translate into common language terms, in order to make sure that customers are getting exactly what they want and that no mistakes are made. In other words, a barista must be able to communicate with both customers and fellow coworkers and adapt their lexicon accordingly to fit the needs of the situation.

Throughout my research, both primary and secondary, it became clear to me that lexicon plays both positive and negative roles in barista-customer interactions. In her article, "For the Love of Joe: The Language of Starbucks," author Constance Ruzich discusses the ways in which Starbucks' language has contributed to the success of their coffee empire. She praises Starbucks for romanticizing coffee in order to draw in more customers, saying, "while much has been written on the ways in which Starbucks uses aromas, music, colors, textures, and even furniture to create the Starbucks' experience, scant attention has been paid to Starbucks' skillful use of language as part of the game of seduction" (432). She goes on to quote David Brooks arguing, "Nor is it ever enough

just to buy something; one has to be able to discourse upon it” (433). This is a strategy that is employed by Starbucks, as well as many other coffee shops. Blends of coffee are described as “powerful and exotic,” “elegant and intriguing,” and “bold and earthy,” all of which entice customers to be adventurous and order that drink (436). Ruzich goes on to quote Shultz and Yang from their article “Pour Your Heart Into It: How Starbucks Built a Company One Cup at a Time,” epitomizing the ways in which lexicon positively influences barista-customer interactions, noting, “Just having the chance to order a drink as exotic as an espresso macchiato adds a spark of romance to an otherwise unremarkable day” (436). This interaction is positive because the romance and intrigue of the exotic drink names keep the customer coming back. A Macchiato sounds fancy and foreign, but it is really just a latte where the espresso shots and flavoring are poured over the milk to ‘mark’ it, rather than the milk being poured over the shots and flavoring, as in a normal latte. Because the customer is not trained in barista and specialty coffee lexis, the use of such alluring terms and names are successful in drawing them in and positively influencing customer interactions.

In the coffee shop that my primary research interview subjects and I work in, such terms are integrated almost daily as well. For example, when customers do not know what to order or if they are wanting to try something new, we often provide them with suggestions of what we think they may like. I have noticed that customers are more likely to order what you suggest if you throw out terms like macchiato or cappuccino rather than just a latte because lattes sound boring, but drinks like macchiatos and cappuccinos sound fancy and daring. Little do they know that they are very similar to the ‘boring’

lattes, with very few minor differences. The illusion of exotic drinks that customers think they are ordering is made possible thanks to the barista and specialty coffee lexicon that is employed by specialty coffee workers yet unfamiliar to the common, untrained consumer. It is not until the customer begins to receive training, formal or informal, that they are able to discern the fancy, intriguing names from common names based on the ingredients that the drinks are composed of. In their article “Bivalent Class Indexing in the Sociolinguistics of Specialty Coffee Talk,” authors William Cotter and Mary-Caitlyn Valentinsson observe how the lexicon of specialty coffee is used and marketed and how it affects and relates to varying class levels. Cotter and Valentinsson introduce ‘cupping’ as an evaluative tool in the coffee industry that is essentially the coffee equivalent of wine tasting. The authors participated in multiple cuppings in order to collect sociolinguistic data for their article. Cotter and Valentinsson explain that “Consumer participation in cupping makes it possible for customers to gain some level of expert knowledge about the flavor profiles and sensory experiences of a given coffee, developing their palates and providing them with the sociolinguistic tools to better describe and discuss coffee as part of their experience of material consumption” (496). In this context, cupping serves as an informal training in barista lexicon for consumers. The sociolinguistic tools that cuppings provide consumers with allows them to better understand specialty coffee and order accordingly. The typical customer, however, receives little to no training, formal or otherwise. For this reason, the illusion of exotic drinks that customers think they are ordering is made possible thanks to barista and

specialty coffee lexicon that is employed by specialty coffee workers yet unfamiliar to the common, untrained consumer.

Conclusion

Barista lexicon is utilized daily in every coffee shop across the world and can either be helpful or a hindrance in barista-customer interactions. On one end of the spectrum, the disconnect in drink terminology and definitions can lead to confusion and ordering mistakes, creating a barrier between barista and customer. On the other, it enhances the experience of customers by providing them with what they believe to be attractive and exotic drink options, while also acting as a learning experience for the barista and the customer alike. When there is a disconnect between customer and barista lexicon, customers may be confused with drink terminology and can end up not being specific enough in what they order or they can be too specific and end up ordering one drink, thinking that it is another drink entirely. Either way, the confusion can lead to orders being made incorrectly and an overall negative interaction between the barista and the customer. On the other hand, the customers' lack of familiarity with barista terminology can promote positive customer experiences because the customer sees exotic drink names and descriptions, which add adventure and spark to their day and ordering experience. Whether positive or negative, barista lexicon shapes nearly every interaction that baristas have with their customers. To expand on the research of language and literacy in barista discourse communities, I would be interested to delve deeper and investigate how language and literacy vary from shop to shop, specifically

looking at chain versus independent corporations, and the effects that they have on customer interactions.

Works Cited

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Appendix A

Interview and Survey Questions

1. How many years of experience do you have working as a barista?
2. Prior to working at Karma, did you have any experience working in a coffee shop?
3. Prior to working at Karma, did you have any experience working as a barista?
4. On average, how many hours do you work as a barista?
5. If you are not currently a barista, on average, how many hours did you work at the time that you were a barista?
6. Prior to working as a barista, did you know the meaning of any of the following terms? If yes, select the terms that you were previously familiar with.
 - Americano
 - Mocha
 - Breve
 - Cappuccino
 - Macchiato
 - Latte
 - Cold Brew
 - Brewed Coffee
 - London Fog
 - Tea Latte

- Espresso
 - Chai
 - Crema
 - Wet Cappuccino
 - Dry Cappuccino
 - Shot in the Dark
 - White Coffee
7. What did you find to be the most difficult aspect of being a barista when you first started working as one?
 8. What kinds of written texts do you use daily as a barista?
 9. To what extent did the Karma barista manual help to prepare you to be a barista? Explain why or why not.
 10. What kinds of vocabulary/lexis do you use as a barista that you do not use in your typical, day to day life, outside of work?
 11. What are the language barriers that you have found are present when communicating with customers? Provide as many examples of your experience with this as possible. How do/did you overcome those barriers?
 12. How do you use communication as a barista?
 13. How does the language/communication at Karma differ from other coffee shops? (Dutch, Starbucks, etc.) If you are unfamiliar with any other coffee shops, write N/A.

Author Bio

Jenifer is a third-year undergraduate student at Western Oregon University. She transferred to WOU in the middle of her second year in order to finish up her prerequisites for a dental hygiene program. She has been a barista for a little over a year now, which was the inspiration for her essay “Barista Lexicon and its Effect on Customer Interactions.” Jenifer lives and works in Polk County, where she grew up.