

# ***Discourse Community of Servers: The Environment's Effect on Behavior and Lexicon***

BECCA BROOKS  
WR 122, Spring 2020

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Walking up, with a bright smile, shoulders back and a warm welcome of “how are you folks tonight?”, your waitress seems like the epitome of charm and joy, but if you were to bump into the same woman on the street you probably wouldn’t even recognize her. The environment formed by the discourse community (DC) of “front of house” food industry workers has molded the charismatic veil that servers put on every shift to earn a living income through tips. The allurement of tips completely changes this DC member's behavior within the 8-10 hour shift. Even in the face of dissatisfied customers yelling, cursing or throwing things at them, they keep a level head and try their best to deescalate the situation. This bottling up of emotions can be detrimental to their physical and mental health, but yet so many people are still within this profession. The combination of keeping composed while multitasking, remembering orders, explaining dozens of dishes beyond their menu description, and not crying in the walk-in (large fridge in the kitchen) is all dictated by the customers who visit their establishment. The DC of waiting on tables is far more complex in its effect on its participants behavior and lexicons within its environment than any other DCs.

Good temperament is simply a commodity within the food industry, you need to have it to advance in this DC. The most influential aspect of the change of communication within this discourse community involves the customers. Wait staff must efficiently and graciously interact with guests within the restaurant/ business. With sometimes 10+ tables within their sections, waiters (and waitresses) have a large responsibility to keep all their customers happy. Their interactions are sometimes as brief as a few words in passing as they wait on another table, but just checking in makes the customer feel heard and taken care of. Every interaction is calculated and thought out. In an interview with Adrienne Green, Marie Billiel speaks about wearing a “mask” during her shift. “It’s also emotional labor having to have that mask on all day” (Green), discussing the front waitstaff out to create a pleasant experience for patrons. This theme is reflected in one of my interviews with Michelle Brooks. She spoke of her time within the business, about the need to bottle-up outside problems to ensure an outstanding experience because “No one wants a bummed out waitress, they are paying for a pleasant experience” (Brooks). This is so important because their livelihoods are made through the customers’ paid gratuity.

Most servers make minimum wage or in some cases even less than that. “A tipped employee engages in an occupation in which he or she customarily and regularly receives more than \$30 per month in tips. An employer of a tipped employee is only required to pay \$2.13 per hour in direct wages if that amount combined with the tips received at least equals the federal minimum wage,” meaning whatever amount of tips are made, that will be taken out of what the owner needs to pay that server. Tips are

usually a reflection of how pleased the customer is with their interaction with the server, the food, and the atmosphere. There is little control on the server's part besides what they can do to physically make the guest happy through their labor. In the article "Scientists Say It's More Stressful to Be a Waiter Than a Neurosurgeon" by Vice, Hurst explains how serving is a "High stress" "Low control" job environment. With the only control they hold being the interactions they conduct, servers evolve their wording and tones to be as amiable as possible. The common goal among this DC is earning a large tip, which is only obtained through their lexicons and hard work pleasing the guest.

The other large portion of communication performed in this DC is between coworkers. The first group is other servers, and this is where most of the specialized vocabulary is used. Some terminology is learned through experience of other waiters or waitresses. Common knowledge of the most basic words are usually to describe people or situations happening within ear reach of the customers that you probably don't want them to hear. While some are generally known, some are specific to certain places. Terminology is as unique as the food served among restaurants, so these can vary between restaurants but usually signify similar meanings. A "Camper" at my restaurant, referred to a customer who has finished eating and drinking, has paid, got their receipt, and had all their dishes bussed BUT will still hangout for another hour during a busy time or after closing. According to Heather Turner's "A Glossary of Restaurant Lingo, Slang & Terms" it meant "Customers that hang out at a table all night long and even turning off all the lights doesn't get rid of them at closing time." With such a vast glossary of vocabulary

not known to the general public, this characteristic that defines it also strengthens its bonds between participants of the DC of waiters or waitresses.

The last group of people regularly interacted with are the cooks, which the writing characteristic is integrated into this DC. Some solely rely on using short term memory to memorize orders to electronically input orders through the point of sales screen, but some restaurants use handwritten order slips. These must be legible, but also abbreviated. Servers must be on their feet thinking of abbreviations that make sense. If someone's order comes with pasta, but the guest would like a baked potato, but there are scalloped potatoes, mashed potatoes, baked potatoes or even potato chips, "Sub. Pot." does not convey which one you need. For the second interviewee Erika Yakimov, there was an intricate system of writing down orders in the restaurant she worked at. It consisted of numbers, shapes, and substitutions encoded in special abbreviations, and if not correctly written down, her order may have been skipped, or delayed until she returned to the kitchen. While there is no universal "code" to the way this DC requires quick, practical writing down of dishes and the changes being made to them for the cooks to alter accordingly.

Most would classify the profession of waiting tables as unintelligent, but it takes great skill to efficiently work a restaurant. While a lot of people are using the job as a stepping stone to get through college or until they find their forever career, valuable experiences translate into competence. "Those [simple] jobs we had did help us gain something more than just a few dollars. They helped us develop transferable skills" (Stoiciu), going on to list seven "transferable skills." A few that directly demonstrate the

literacy divergence of this particular DC is “crisis management,” “customer service” and “communication” (Stoiciu). Crisis management develops with the lack of personal control of their environment, such as wrong food or a hair in the food, keen problem solving can resolve a situation before it gets out of hand. Customer Service is a fundamental thing conditioned into a server's soul, that is not taught but learned through experience.

Communication is probably the most critical skill acquired, since it is the only controllable aspect within the setting, it can make or break a server. This DC requires its members to modify their speech and conduct according to the environment, while it might seem elementary it creates skills that can be essential in maturing professionally.

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## **Author Bio**

Rebecca Brooks is a Sophomore Biology Major at WOU.

## **Additional questions:**

**1)** What did you learn about your DC that was unexpected or surprising?

I had no clue that the environment we work alters our behavior so much, at work its just kind of a switch I'd flip on. It makes sense why I was so emotionally drained by the end of the shift, which is a common issue I found within my research and interviews,



unfortunately a normal strain that is put on waitresses. The change of language and emotion is a very particular characteristic this DC holds that many other don't. Changing ones behavior so drastically, for financial benefit is a weird commerce, pleasantries for gratuity is all it really is.

**2) How could you expand this research into a deeper and more involved study?**

I think we are conditioned to be that way, because we get paid nothing, and the only real way to make money in that job is through tips. I think a larger study with similar questions I posed in my interviews would be interesting, to compare how people perceived their contribution of this DC. I think this aspect of the DC is emotionally damaging, and would be interested to see what those who work 10+ years in serving industry do to cope with the issues many face.

**3) If you'd had more time, what would you have done differently?**

If I had more time I would have interviewed more people, and try to find more intricate articles about this specific aspect of waiting tables, the change of lexicons and personality, it

definitely takes a certain type of person. I would also put more time in the psychology of this topic, the mental processes and what damages or issues may it cause.