of consensus is legendary in our family, only read every other chapter of *War and Peace*, so we like to say she just read Tolstoy’s *Peace.*

All innovation happens at interstices. Great food is no exception, created at the intersection of cultures as each one modifies and enhances what is borrowed from its neighbors. The language of food is a window onto these “between” places, the ancient clash of civilizations, the modern clash of culture, the covert clues to human cognition, society, and evolution. Every time you roast a turkey for Thanksgiving, toast the bride and groom at a wedding, or decide what potato chips or ice cream to buy, you are having a conversation in the language of food.

_San Francisco, California_
_April 2014_

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**How to Read a Menu**

San Francisco’s most expensive restaurant won’t give you a menu. Well, that’s not strictly true. The attentive staff will happily offer you a beautifully printed list of dishes (“trout roe, sea urchin, cardoon, brassicas . . .”)—by email, after you get home, as a souvenir. Saison, this marvelous Michelin-starred restaurant, isn’t alone. Expensive restaurants everywhere increasingly offer “blind” tasting menus in which you don’t know what you’re going to eat in each course until the plate is set down on your table. When it comes to high-status restaurants, it seems that the more you pay, the less choice you have.

Status used to be expressed a different way. If you ate out in the 1970s I’m sure you dined at one of those establishments that writer Calvin Trillin called *La Maison de la Casa House*, *Continental Cuisine*. Trillin, an early supporter of local and ethnic eating, mocked pretentious restaurants whose menus were as macaronic a mishmash of French and English as their names (*macaronic*: from a sixteenth-century verse style mixing Latin with Italian dialect originally named, as we’ll see, after macaroni). Trillin complained of being led to a “purple palace that serves ‘Continental cuisine’ and has as its chief creative employee a menu-writer rather than a chef.”

Menu writing manuals of the day advised restaurants to “continentalize your menu,” and indeed they did, as we see from these examples, with French words mixed in randomly with English or Italian words;
sometimes even just the French article “Le” with an otherwise English sentence:

Flaming Coffee Diablo, Prepared en Vue of Guest
Ravioli parmigiana, en casserole
Le Crabmeat Cocktail

Menus full of macaronic French weren’t just a fad. Through the wonder of the Internet, we can go back in time more than a century in the New York Public Library’s online menu collection (donated by Miss Frank E. Buttolph [1850–1924], a “tiny, unostentatious, literary-looking lady” with an obsession for menus). The 10,000 menus start with the Astor House’s breakfast menu for the Ladies Ordinary meeting of August 25, 1843 (clam soup, boiled cod, mutton cutlets “sauté, with champignons,” calf’s head, chicken pies, mashed potatoes, beets, squash, roast beef, lamb, snipe, squab, goose, and in case anyone was still hungry, blackberry pie, cream pie, peach ices, and macarons for dessert; we’ll come back to those macarons. Menus from the early 1900s are full of interwoven bits of French, especially those from expensive and upper-middle-priced restaurants, which use it five times more than cheap restaurants:

Flounder sur le plat
Eggs au beurre noir
Fried chicken a la Maryland half
Green turtle a l’anglaise
Sirloin steak aux champignons

You probably noticed the extraordinary attention the menu writers paid to the origins of the food, mentioning the names of farms (“Elysian Fields,” “Dirty Girl,” “blue star”), giving us images of the ranch (“grass fed,” “pasture raised”), and alluding to the farmer’s market (“Greenmarket Cucumbers”). And menu writers aren’t the only ones to get carried away. In the first episode of the show Portlandia Fred Armisen and Carrie Brownstein, obsessive locavores, question the provenance of the chicken at
large dataset, very expensive ($$$$) restaurants mention the origins of the food more than 15 times as often as inexpensive restaurants! This obsession with provenance is a strong indicator that you are in an expensive, fancy restaurant. (Or that you are purchasing an expensive package of junk food, marketed with the exact same strategies, as we’ll see.)

We discovered many other linguistic properties with economic implications in our study. For example, the tendency of expensive restaurants to choose what you’re going to eat extends far beyond posh Michelin-star places like Saison. Even on a la carte menus, a more expensive restaurant is more likely to offer a prix fixe selection, or to describe an individual dish as being composed of a “chef’s choice” or the “chef’s selection,” as we see in the following examples:

Sashimi Omakase: ten kinds of chef’s choice
Antipasto Della Casa: The chef’s daily selection

In cheaper restaurants, by contrast, the diner has a lot of choice, as linguist Robin Lakoff pointed out. First of all, inexpensive restaurants just have far more dishes. On average twice as many. Think about the menu at the last Chinese restaurant you went to, or the last diner, compared to the last fancy restaurant. Cheap restaurants are likely to give a choice of sizes (small, medium, or large), or a choice of proteins (chicken, shrimp, or tofu). Another linguistic cue on menus of cheap restaurants is that the word you appears much more often, in phrases like “your choice” or “your way.” Here are some examples:

Baby lamb chops grilled to your liking
Marinated flank steak with eggs your way
Quiche with your choice of either house salad or a cup of soup
Biscuits and gravy with eggs anyway you like ’em
We found that expensive ($$$) restaurants have half as many dishes as cheap ($) restaurants, are three times less likely to talk about the diner’s choice, and are seven times more likely to talk about the chef’s choice.

Fancy restaurants, not surprisingly, also use fancy words. In menus from 50 to 100 years ago this often meant long French words, but now lots of other foreign words are used on fancy menus. In our sample of expensive modern menus this means words like *tonnarelli, choco, bostilla, kataifi, persillade,* and *oyako* (from Italian, Peruvian Spanish, Arabic, Greek, French, and Japanese, respectively).

But there are fancy words in English too—what my dad, using the old term for fifty cents, calls “two-bit words,” long multisyllabic words with 11 or 12 letters or more. Why would a word be fancy just because it is longer? Well, for one thing, many of our longer words came into English from French or Latin, historically high-status languages. For another: longer words are used less frequently; in fact, the longer, the rarer. This is obvious if you think about it; short words (words like *of, I, the, a*) are grammatical words that appear all over the place, while very long words (like *accompaniments*) appear in much fewer situations.

This relationship between word length and word frequency was first discovered by Sibawayhi, a Persian grammarian of the eighth century, in one of many scientific revolutions and inventions that come from the Muslim world. Sibawayhi came to what is now Iraq just after the construction of Baghdad, the fabled capital of the Abbasid Dynasty and perhaps the greatest center of learning and science in the medieval world. (As we’ll see in later chapters, Baghdad was also where the fabulous foods of the caliphs were developed that became the source of many of our modern foods.)

Sibawayhi originally came from Persia to study law, but then one day when reciting out loud he made an embarrassing error in pronouncing an Arabic word. His fellow students shamed him in public for his bad language skills (I guess eighth-century law students were no less cutthroat than modern ones), and according to at least one story that’s why Sibawayhi switched fields and spent the rest of his life studying linguistics. (Public humiliation is not a method that is normally recommended in modern universities to get students to choose a major. Unless, of course, it gets students interested in linguistics.)

Sibawayhi’s theory was reinvented and formalized 1200 years later, in the 1930s, when linguist George Zipf suggested that frequently used words are shortened so as to make communication more efficient; you can pack more words in a smaller space and time for your listener if the ones that you use more often, the frequent ones, are shorter. Zipf’s ideas helped lead to the brilliant work of Claude Shannon 10 years later at Bell Labs in creating information theory. Without these ideas, our modern digital collections of menus (or sound recordings, or photographs) would be impossible.

Anyhow, these rare, long, fancy words that appear more often in expensive restaurants are words like *decaffeinated, accompaniments, complements, traditionally, specifications, preparation, overflowing, magnificent, inspiration, exquisitely, and tenderness.* By contrast, cheaper restaurants use shorter forms: *decaf* instead of *decaffeinated,* *sides* instead of *accompaniments* or *complements.* Words on menus at expensive restaurants average about half a letter longer than those on menus at cheap ones.

Fancy words are thus an indicator that we are at a fancy restaurant. But using a fancy word in a dish description tells you something even more specific: it tells you about the actual price of the dish!

To study this, my colleagues and I looked at the price of all 650,000 dishes on the 6500 menus, and used statistical tools to find which words are associated with higher and lower prices. The most important factor that affects the price of a dish is the type of food; lobster costs more than chicken, which costs more than a side of toast. So we statistically controlled for the type of food, the cuisine of the restaurant (Chinese, Italian, steakhouses, diners, cafes) and how expensive the restaurant is,
and which city and neighborhood the restaurant was in. After all these controls, we then studied the additional affect of individual words on the prices.

What we found is that when a restaurant uses longer words to describe a dish, it charges more for the dish. Every increase of one letter in the average length of words describing a dish is associated with an increase of 18 cents in the price of that dish! This means that if a restaurant uses words that are on average three letters longer, you’ll be paying 54 cents extra for your roast chicken or pasta. To our surprise, the phrase “two-bit words” turns out to quite literally (if accidentally) refer to the fifty cents more per dish if the restaurant uses long, fancy words on the menu!

Counting letters is one way to find out the hidden information that restaurateurs are sneaking onto your menu, but another is to check whether the restaurant emphasizes how exotic or spicy the food is. If so, watch out! Look for phrases like “exotic blend of Indian spices” or “exotic Ethiopian spices” or even just “tamarind fish soup with exotic vegetables.” Our study found that every use of the word exotic or spices raises the price of a dish. Presumably the reason is that such foods would not be exotic to someone who is in fact Ethiopian or Indian. These restaurants are not advertising to native eaters of the cuisine, who eat it every day and are aware of the exact value. That “exotifying” or orientalist stance is instead directed at the non-native eaters, food tourists like me who want something different and, fair is fair, get charged more for it.

Five Spices Duck: Young duck boiled in exotic five spices broth, deboned and served with spicy vinaigrette.

Bhindi Masala: Okra cooked with onions, tomatoes, and an exotic blend of Indian spices.

Here’s a third trick for reading between the lines in menus: hunt for what I call “linguistic fillers.” Consider for example positive but vague words like delicious and synonyms tasty, mouth-watering, flavorful, scrumptious, and savory, or words like terrific, wonderful, delightful, and sublime. These words seem to promise something special about what you’re going to get, but in a subjective enough way that the restaurant sneakily avoids incurring any sort of actual obligation (you can’t sue because you thought your scrod wasn’t scrumptious). Another type is what my colleague Arnold Zwicky calls “appealing adjectives”: words like zesty, rich, golden brown, crispy, or crunchy. These aren’t completely uninformative (golden brown means something different from crunchy) but whether something is zesty is a matter of opinion.

Both of these categories of linguistic filler words are associated with lower prices. After controlling for the factors mentioned above (the food itself, the type of cuisine, the average price and location of the restaurant), we saw the relationship between the words on the menu and the price. For each positive vague word like delicious, tasty, or terrific you see on a dish, the average price of the dish is nine percent less. Each appealing adjective like rich, chunky, or zesty is associated with a price that is two percent lower.

Our finding is one of association rather than causation. That is, we can’t say for sure whether restaurants actually base their price on the number of times they call the dish delicious, or whether they decided to call the dish delicious after looking at the price, or whether some other unknown factor (what we technically call an exogenous factor) is causing both the price and the wording. All we can say for certain is that lower prices and filler words seem to go together. Nonetheless, we have a hypothesis about what’s going on. We suspect that empty words are linked with lower prices because they are in fact fillers; stuff you put in the description of a dish when you don’t have something really
valuable like crab or porterhouse to talk about instead. Steven Levitt and
Stephen Dubner in *Freakonomics* show that this same principle applies
to real estate advertising as well. They found that houses whose real
estate ads had words like *fantastic* or *charming* tended to sell for lower
prices, while houses whose ads had words like *maple* and *granite* tended
to sell for higher prices. Their hypothesis was that real estate agents
used vague positive words like *fantastic* to mask the lack of any specific
positive qualities in the house. Indeed, in restaurants, the words that
correlate with higher prices are not the empty words like *fantastic* but
the words describing truly valuable products like lobster, truffle, or
caviar.

Here are some examples of sentences stuffed with fillers; see how
many total fillers you notice in these three dishes:

**BLT Salad:** *a flavorful, colorful and delicious salad mixture of
crispy bacon bits, lettuce, tomatoes, red and green onions and
garlic croutons tossed with bleu cheese dressing*

**Homemade Meatloaf Sandwich:** *Flavorful, juicy, & delicious.*
*Served warm with our BBQ ketchup, caramelized onions,*
& melted American cheese

**Mango Chicken:** *Delicious golden fried white meat chicken nuggets*  
*sauteed in a sweet savory sauce, with freshly sliced mango chunks,*
carrots and bell peppers

I counted at least 13: *delicious* (three times), *flavorful* (twice), *colorful,*
crispy, juicy, warm, golden, sweet, savory, and freshly.

These filler words tell us something else about the restaurant.
Consider the restaurants that have very long, wordy menus with lots
of filler words. You might think these could be the very expensive
restaurants with the high-powered menu-writing, marketing consultants. Or it could be the very cheap restaurants, using filler words to
make up for not-very-fancy food.

In fact, it's neither: long, wordy menus with lots of filler words occur
in the middle-priced restaurants, chains like Ruby Tuesday, T.G.I Fri-
day's, Cheesecake Factory, or California Pizza Kitchen or local places.

Descriptive adjectives like *fresh, rich, spicy, crispy, crunchy, tangy,*
juicy, zesty, chunky, smoky, salty, cheesy, fluffy, flaky, and buttery appear
significantly more often in menus from these middle-priced restaurants:

Crisp Golden Brown Belgian Waffle with Fresh Fruit

Mushroom Omelette: *Our fluffy omelette filled with fresh mushrooms*  
*and topped with a rich mushroom sherry sauce*

Chicken Marsala: *Tender chicken breast in a rich marsala wine sauce*  
*with fresh mushrooms*

Rustic Apple Galette: *Hand crafted tart in five inches of*  
*butter flaky french puff pastry. We layer fresh ripe apples and*  
*bake to a golden brown*

Why would it be middle-priced and not expensive restaurants that use
more of these adjectives?

To understand the answer to this we have to consider the function
of these adjectives. The literal meaning of "delicious" is that the
food tastes good. The literal meaning of "ripe" is that the apple wasn't
picked when it was still sour and green. But why would a restaurant
serve unripe apples or cook bad-tasting food? Doesn't it go without
saying that the food will taste good and the apples be ripe?

One of the most important language philosophers of the twentieth
century, H. Paul Grice, gave an answer to this problem. Grice pointed out that when we are trying to understand a speaker, we assume that they are acting rationally. If they say something is fresh, there must be some reason to say it's fresh; speakers don't just add in random words. (Grice called this the “maxim of quantity”; there is also a related “maxim of relevance” that says that speakers try to say relevant things.) So if I hear someone say that something is fresh (or ripe, or fluffy, or golden brown), I immediately consider why it would be relevant to mention ripeness. We generally mention ripeness because there is an implicit comparison with unripeness. It's something like saying, You might worry that this fruit is unripe, but don't worry, I hereby reassure you that it's ripe. That is, just the mention of ripeness brings up the possibility that there might be some people that might not think it's ripe, and I'm mentioning this to convince them.

Linguist Mark Liberman suggests that we think of this overmentioning as a symptom of “status anxiety.” Expensive restaurants don’t use the word ripe (or fresh or crispy) because we assume that food that should be ripe is ripe, and everything is fresh. Middle-priced restaurants are worried that you won’t assume that because they aren’t fancy enough, so they go out of their way to reassure you. Protesting too much.

We can see a similar implication of Grice’s idea in the use of the word real on menus. You’ll find the word on lots of menus, but exactly, which foods the restaurants claim are “real” depends sharply on the price. Cheap restaurants promise you real whipped cream, real mashed potatoes, and real bacon:

Chocolate Chip Pancakes: served with real whipped cream.


Chicken Cutlet: Melted Swiss Cheese on a Roll with Lettuce, Tomato, Russian Dressing and Real Bacon Bits.

In slightly more expensive ($$) restaurants, real is used mainly to describe crab and maple syrup:

California Roll: real crab and avocado

Blueberry Whole Grain Pancakes: With real maple syrup

By contrast, real is barely used at all for more expensive ($$$ and $$$$) restaurants. This isn’t because the bacon isn’t real at these restaurants, but rather because customers already assume that the bacon and whipped cream and crab are real. For a pricy restaurant to call its crab “real” would be to suggest that its realness might be in question and has to be defended. Once again, Grice’s principle is in play: if a restaurant says the butter is real, there must be a reason to say so, and a normal reason you might go to the trouble of saying that something is real is that you are worried the person you’re talking to thinks it’s fake and you want to reassure them. Expensive restaurants certainly don’t want to imply that any of their customers might think their butter is fake.

The history of which foods are called “real” or “genuine” on menus is a mini lesson on what was considered valuable enough to create a fake substitute. The 1990s had real bacon (not Bacon Bits). The 1970s and 1980s had real whipped cream (not Cool Whip) and real sour cream (not Imo). The 1960s menus had real butter (not margarine). The 1940s and 1930s had genuine calves’ liver.

Around 1900 the foods most frequently called “real” or “genuine” weren’t any of these. Back then it was fake beer and fake turtles that people were worried about. Menus of the day boast of “real German beer” and “real turtle.” German pale lager came to us in the great
German immigrations of the nineteenth century (along with hamburgers, frankfurters, seltzer, home-fried potatoes, potato salad, and the delicasessen). Before this, Americans only drank dark English-style ale. The pale cold-fermented lagers brewed by ethnic German entrepreneurs like Miller, Pabst, Schlitz, and Busch became popular by the turn of the nineteenth century, and restaurants boasted of being able to serve this new prestige product. Turtle soup was also a sought-after delicacy of the day, so much so that mock turtle soup, made of brains and calves' heads (and not of Mock Turtles, whatever Lewis Carroll said) was common as a cheaper substitute. In fact, Jane Ziegelman tells us in her book *97 Orchard: An Edible History of Five Immigrant Families* that New York restaurants "often nailed a real tortoise shell to the doorpost" as a sign that they served real green turtle soup.

The signs we use for prestige these days are less obvious than that tortoise shell, but they are still there in the menu. Of course these days we don't use macaronic French. Our modern fancy menus are light and terse, with no cheap filler adjectives or endless protestations about what's "real." When you're demonstrating high status, less is more, in words as in food. Fancy menus are lightly seasoned with something else instead: carefully selected obscure food words and pastoral images of green pastures and heirloom vegetables. If they offer you a menu at all.

And you should probably avoid that menu loaded with linguistic fillers like crispy, crunchy, tangy, juicy,asty, chunky, smoky, or fluffy, adjectives written by a menu writer trying too hard to convince you. As for the word "exotic," if you see it, don't pay the surcharge that it implies. Instead, do what Calvin Trillin would do: sneak off down the street to the place that is authentic enough not to have to protest it so much.

**Two**

**Entrée**

Living in San Francisco means visitors, and visitors mean an excuse to wander down Bernal Hill and explore various delicious dinner options along Mission Street. My houseguests are always open-minded eaters, but they do sometimes find odd things to complain about. My cranky British friend Paul is irked by the interminable questions at cafes here ("Single or double? Small, medium, large? For here or to go? Milk or soy? Whole milk or nonfat?"). "Just give me a bloody coffee," says Paul, who thinks Americans have control issues. Indeed, as we just saw, the profusion of choices offered by cafes, diners, fast-food, and other inexpensive outlets is matched only by the control we abdicate when selecting the tasting menus at our expensive restaurants.

Paul is also annoyed by our parochial word usage. For example, the word *entree* in the United States means a main course while in France and the UK *entrée* means what we would call the appetizer course. Thus a French meal might consist of an entrée, the main course (the *plat*), and dessert, while a corresponding American meal would have appetizer, entrée, and dessert. Since the word *entrée* comes originally from French and literally means "entrance," we Americans, Paul suggested to me at dinner one night, must have botched up the meaning of this word at some point.

Paul's hypothesis seems reasonable, and since he also complains about my fork and knife etiquette (it turns out I don't align my fork