

# RECURRENT LEXIS AND PHRASEOLOGY IN ENGLISH RESTAURANT REVIEWS: A DATA-DRIVEN ANALYSIS

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## Abstract

This paper presents a corpus linguistic analysis of recurrent vocabulary and phraseology in written English food discourse. More specifically, it focuses on the use and discourse functions of keywords, key multi-word terms and lexical bundles in a specialized corpus comprising 200 professional restaurant reviews that were published in online editions of selected British and American newspapers. The results of the study indicate that the most distinctive lexical feature of the analyzed texts is the frequent mention of ingredients and the limited presence of stance devices. The most frequently mentioned aspects of the referential content also show that what is evaluated is the total experience of eating and dining at a restaurant. These findings contribute to the area of English for Specific Purposes, offering pedagogical potential that can be exploited when developing purpose-made teaching materials for students in food-related programs who need to learn the specialized vocabulary of their target profession.

## Keywords

food discourse, restaurant reviews, corpus linguistics, keywords, multi-word terms, lexical bundles

## 1 Introduction

Food, cooking and eating out have become a ubiquitous trend in today's world, in which the questions where, what and with whom to eat have steered a path towards a new form of recreation: restaurant dining. According to the annual report of the National Restaurant Association (2020), the frequency of meals consumed away from home has been constantly increasing and consumers declare their readiness to use fine dining establishments even more in the future. These phenomena mean that also restaurant criticism is on the rise, with professional restaurant reviews being the main credible source of information on how to enhance the dining out experience. As Mützel (2015) explains, restaurant reviews constitute a constellation of different "registers of valuing (...) of evaluation and valuation" (ibid.: 147). They evaluate the act of eating in a specific restaurant by relating it to expectations and earlier experiences, as well as produce value, since the assessment can induce people to visit the place or not. Mützel (ibid.) adds that reviews also represent valuations by ascribing various qualities to a restaurant at a given moment in time. Therefore, restaurant reviews

can affect the prices, the menu or even the very existence of a particular eating establishment, as well as shape consumers' tastes and eating habits, and educate them about new cuisines and old culinary traditions.

Despite the interest that people have in professional restaurant reviews, the latter seem to be a somewhat neglected area of research with limited literature available (see Titz et al. 2004, Williamson et al. 2009). There have been studies focusing on the reviews' impact on customers' tastes (e.g. Vincent 2019) and choice of a restaurant (e.g. Barrows et al. 1989), the criteria used to judge restaurants (e.g. Williamson et al. 2009), as well as on comparing professional reviews with semi-professional and user-generated ones (e.g. Parikh 2017) and teaching genre conventions to students (e.g. Matwick & Matwick 2018). Some of these studies, especially the ones focused on texts rather than their readers, can be also categorized as content analyses of reviews which, however, similarly as Titz et al.'s (2004) investigation, largely aim to identify the critic's descriptors used for recounting their restaurant dining experience. Little attention has been devoted to the linguistic features of reviews, not to mention their lexico-semantic characteristics. A notable exception is Hou's (2012) corpus-based study of 15 reviews from American newspapers. Yet, the main focus on move analysis and lexical analysis is limited to determining the word classes of frequent content words, without exploring the surface manifestations of these categories. More details on the vocabulary used in reviews are provided by Vincent (2019), but her comments relate only to the texts written by two Australian restaurant critics, and thus reflect their individual idiolects rather than give an insight into recurrent patterns of language use in restaurant reviews.

The present study attempts to address this gap by identifying and describing salient vocabulary and phraseology in a specialized corpus of restaurant reviews written in English by professional critics. The collected texts, considered as a type of food discourse, are explored with respect to the use and specific discourse functions of recurrent keywords, specialized multi-word terms and lexical bundles. These naturally occurring language data constitute authentic English for Specific Purposes, the exploration of which also has pedagogical potential. In particular, the highlighted lexical and phraseological aspects of the text variety under investigation can help to develop purpose-made teaching materials for learners in food-related courses, including food journalists and critics, and assist them in the acquisition of the specialized lexis and phraseology of their target profession. It is believed that this research will provide a good foundation for future data-driven lexical analyses of English food discourse as reflected in professional restaurant reviews.

## 2 Restaurant review as a form of food discourse

Dictionary definitions of food show that what we eat or drink is first and foremost meant to keep us alive, nourished or furnished with energy. No mention is made of the centrality of food to human communication, although “eating and talking are universal human traits” that are interconnected on many different plains (Gerhard 2013: 3). There are numerous manifestations of the ways in which food and language intersect and one of them is food discourse. Matwick and Matwick (2019) define the phenomenon as a “written, spoken, and visual text about food on topics such as food preparation, presentation, and consumption, which expresses individual and collective sociocultural values about food” (ibid.: 9). Riley and Cavanaugh (2017) make a terminological distinction between discourse/language about food, seen as the ways in which food becomes a topic of discourse, and around food, seen as the ways in which people use language in the presence of food. Combs (2018) argues that “food discourse is any form of verbal or nonverbal communication that utilizes food to interact with others” (ibid.: 2, 23) but admits that actually the concept has no unanimous definition. This, in turn, leads to the situation in which even the term itself has alternative labels, such as “culinary discourse” (see e.g. Cesiri 2019) or “gastronomic discourse” (see e.g. Spang 2000).

This terminological dispute leads to the conclusion that food discourse is a universal communicative phenomenon that comes in many guises and is a vital part of human culture. There are forms of food discourse that are spoken, such as dinner talk or everyday talk about food; mediated, such as television commercials of food products or cooking shows; as well as written, such as cookery books or recipes. It is the latter type of food-related discourse that is of interest in the present study, which is focused specifically on professional restaurant reviews. Ferguson (2014) claims that food writing has continued to evolve since records began but it was not earlier than the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when “a consciousness of food writing as a distinct genre” (ibid.: 52-53) was developed in France to become an autonomous part of the public sphere labeled as gastronomy. Numerous genres of gastronomic writing were created and the authors of such texts started to be known as food writers or gastronomes who not only cultivated their own “refined taste for the pleasures of the table, but also, by writing about it”, helped “to cultivate other people’s too” (Mennell 1996: 267). This laid the foundations for the emergence of restaurant reviews and critics.

An important figure in the history of restaurant reviewing is Aleksander Baltazar Grimod de la Reynière, a French writer from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one of the “founders of food, wine, and restaurant criticism, of which the connoisseurial

review is a central element” (Kobez 2018: 264). As Ferguson (2014: 64) writes, Grimod is credited as the first restaurant critic, whose gastronomic guidebook, the *Almanach des Gourmands*, where his reviews were published, contributed to the development of gastronomic journalism, and especially its variant known as food criticism. Owing to his writing, which combined criticism and commentary, restaurant-going became a matter of taste not only for food but also for all aspects of the dining experience, including popularity, location, design, price, service and atmosphere. Incorporating advice on what, where and how to eat, Grimod’s recommendations are very similar to contemporary restaurant reviews.

It was not until mid-twentieth century that restaurant reviewing became formalized with some ethical and procedural tenets that would add credibility to the critics’ assessments. The person who established these rules, and is thus “credited with being the inventor of the modern restaurant review”, was Craig Claiborne, the food editor at *The New York Times* under whose supervision, the first newspaper restaurant review was published (Sietsema 2010). As Matwick and Matwick (2018: 27) report, Claiborne insisted that reviews should be written by a single individual, who had previously visited the restaurant at least three times, each time tasting three or four dinners, or even ordering the same dishes more than once, to cover most of the menu. The critic remained anonymous and never accepted free meals, as those were to be paid for by the newspaper to avoid a conflict of interest. Sietsema (2010) adds that in those first reviews, dishes were explained in short declarative sentences, which made the texts similar to an encounter between “a very articulate high school teacher” and his “enthralled students”. The restaurant was also awarded stars according to its merit, similarly as in the reviews we know nowadays. These novel ideas legitimized the profession of restaurant criticism.

The contemporary restaurant critic is a professional restaurant visitor, usually with training in journalism and sometimes also with restaurant industry experience (Titz et al. 2004), who follows the rules set by Claiborne but also saturates their food writing with an individual style and personality, seeking “to review restaurants at the forefront of new trends alongside those that epitomise the highest standards” (Kobez 2018: 5). Connoisseurial reviews, that is, those relying on “the judgment and expertise (and, sometimes, prose style) of a single professional food writer or writers” (Mallory 2015: 1211), should have three important characteristics, which Blank (2007: 47) labels as “dining experience description, review brevity, and brief summary”. Writing such a review requires food knowledge, a refined taste as well as a good sense of the written word to accurately describe the food one has eaten.

Considering the restaurant review as a genre of professional food writing, it is seen as a form of specialist journalism which is essentially an honest “description and evaluation of the experience of eating in a restaurant” that assists readers in their choice, understanding and appreciation of the dining-out experience (Blank 2007: 45). Similarly, Davis (2009) claims that “reviews disseminate socially coded information about food and restaurants that informs discourse in which our collective tastes are constructed” (ibid.: 4). Mützel (2015) considers restaurant reviews as public summaries and evaluations that help customers “to be more knowledgeable in their choices, understanding, or appreciation of products or performances” (ibid.: 150). According to Mallory (2015), restaurant reviews “describe, assess, and judge the worthiness of restaurants (sometimes with a numerical rating or ratings) based on multiple criteria” (ibid.: 1210-1211). These criteria are made somewhat more specific by Hou (2012), who defines the review 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” which aims to “to inform the public of the type of food and standards they can expect at a given eating establishment” (ibid.: 97-98).

Matwick and Matwick (2018: 30) claim that the main genre conventions include a title capturing the critic’s opinion and signaling the restaurant’s name; key information about culinary style, location, opening hours, contact details, prices; layout, including music, temperature, interior, overall comfort level; review, which is the main evaluation of the quality and type of food served; comments on the service; a final evaluation; and rating, which is usually star-based. The authors add that the text should be evocative and the descriptions of specific dishes should be marked by precision, vivid adjectives, sensory details, metaphors and sensuality. Danowska-Tomczyk (2018) argues that for a review to be credible and helpful to the customers, it should provide a detailed description of the meal (both food and beverages), with the focus on such aspects as quality, taste, appearance, amount, temperature, type of cuisine; as well as comments on service; décor and organization of the interior, including ambience and music; and price or value for money. Towards the end of the text, there should be also provided an overall assessment of the visit, which can be additionally marked on a scale, and a declaration on whether the place is worth visiting. Similar criteria for reviewing restaurants are mentioned by Mallory (2015: 1210-1211), who explains that reviews do not simply rate the quality of an eating establishment, but also indicate what is trendy in terms of taste, cuisine and location. Williamson et al. (2009) add to this list such categories as wine, chefs and owner/operators, whereas Jacob (2015) mentions also appeal, claiming that the authors of reviews are believed “to have superior palates and their judgment wields power” (ibid.: 15).

Hou (2012: 98), who conducted a rhetorical move analysis of newspaper restaurant reviews, concludes that their organizing pattern involves five main moves. First, there is a detailed description of the establishment that introduces its history, location, neighborhood and the chef or owner of the place. Then, there is a description of entering, which involves getting a reservation, checking out the façade, presenting the menu as well as commenting on the service and different aspects of ambience. The third move establishes the dining experience by focusing on the food, including its quality, presentation, preparation, variety and price. Next, attention is devoted to possible unpleasant experiences, and finally comes a wrap-up. Titz et al. (2004) examined the content of newspaper restaurant reviews and found that critics concentrated on the quality of food as well as ambience and atmosphere, but devoted less attention to the other aspects of the dining experience, usually mentioning them if they were beyond the expectations. Similarly, Parikh et al. (2017) discovered that professional reviews mainly focus on food, followed by ambience, wine and service, but marginalize value/cost and people involved in the restaurant business.

Regarding other genre conventions, Hou (2012) claims that reviews start with a heading that mentions the restaurant's name, follow a chronological order, do not have a clearly stated thesis statement but use some rating system, usually a star-based one. Towards the end of a review, additional comments are provided to give extra information about, for instance, the place's operating hours, location, website, price range or reservation. Details are described in a very precise and tangible way to make the reader feel they know the dish, and the whole visit is narrated in the first person, using the present tense, to bring the audience closer to the critic's experience. A "departure from the utilitarian simplicity of language use", especially when describing food, is also reported by Williamson et al. (2009: 58), who add that some reviewers even employ artistic or metaphysical motifs. The reviews that are written today, in contrast to the first reviews by Claiborne, use longer sentences – in Hou's (2012: 99) study, the sentences were on average 19.21 word long, and they are even longer in the reviews analyzed here: 20.32 words. Regarding the average length of the whole review, this is according to Parikh et al. (2017: 504) around 1,100 words, but the texts in the study corpus are shorter, as they have 948.39 words on average. Hou (2012) also reports a high lexical variety of the reviews she examined, which is also the case in the texts analyzed here (see Section 3).

Overall, it seems that an effective review concentrates on the offered food, which is "the most important review factor" (Parikh 2017: 497) that predominates in the text (see e.g. Titz et al. 2004, Williamson et al. 2009, Hou 2012). Additionally, Vincent (2019: 47) suggests that it should be creative, as its

aim is both to inform and engage the readers, which is expected to be reflected in the key lexis and phraseology occurring in the sample of restaurant reviews analyzed in the present study.

### 3 Material and methodology

The analysis is based on a specialized corpus of 200 professional restaurant reviews randomly collected (from January to mid-November 2019) from seven digitally accessed newspapers: *The Guardian* (TG), *The Independent* (TI), *Los Angeles Times* (LAT), *New York Times* (NYT), *Atlanta Magazine* (AM), *Richmond Magazine* (RM) and *The Pitch Magazine* (TPM). Specifically, 83.5 per cent (167) of the reviews were taken from the first four sources, which represent major British and American quality newspapers. Each of them, except the NYT, contributed all reviews published in the mentioned period of 2019, provided the texts were concerned with restaurants and were available for free. The NYT, however, requires its readers to pay for much of its online content, therefore only eight reviews were derived from this newspaper. The remaining 16.5 per cent (33) of the reviews were culled from the final three sources, which are monthly general-interest magazines of a somewhat more local nature. This set of texts included all 16 restaurant reviews published in the mentioned period in *Atlanta Magazine* as well as a few additional reviews found in the other two magazines which were collected so that the research material would actually count a total of 200 reviews.

The reviews were converted to plain-text format, bringing the total of 189,678 word tokens and 18,491 word types, which yields a standardized type/token ratio of 51.34, indicating a relatively high lexical variety in the study corpus. Admittedly, the corpus is small, but this, as Flowerdew (2004: 15, 19) argues, makes it relevant to providing insights into how language is used in the particular specialized context investigated, in which “specialized lexis and structures are likely to occur with more regular patterning and distribution” than in large and general collections (O’Keeffe et al. 2007: 198). The study also used the English web 2015 (enTenTen15) as a reference corpus, comprising 15 billion words of texts collected from the Internet. It is quite a recent collection and thus more relevant to the study than, for instance, the BNC, which was compiled around 25 years ago.

A combination of corpus-based and corpus-driven methodologies were employed to identify salient lexical and phraseological aspects of the restaurant reviews under scrutiny. The former involved the identification of keywords and multi-word terms using SketchEngine (Kilgarriff et al. 2014), and the latter involved the identification of 4-word lexical bundles (Biber et al. 1999) or

clusters (Scott 1996) using WordSmith Tools 6.0 (Scott 2012). Single and multi-word (i.e. noun phrases) key lexical items were identified with the minimum frequency cut-off point set at 5 and the focus value set at 0,00001, which allows to extract words that are rare in the reference corpus but frequent in the study corpus. Hence, the extracted items can be considered as typical of the content of the restaurant reviews investigated, that is, indicative of their “aboutness” (Scott & Tribble 2006). The top 100 items were scanned and after filtering out proper names, a sample of 92 keywords and 99 key terms were analyzed qualitatively. Specifically, based on a close reading of concordances, the key lexical units were assigned to text-type and domain-specific categories that were developed intuitively to reflect the specialized functions and/or meanings typically carried by them in the study corpus. In turn, frequent 4-word bundles<sup>1</sup>, which “appear to have a more readily recognizable range of structures and functions than” 3-word ones, were identified with the frequency threshold set at 5 (Goźdz-Roszkowski 2011: 110). This procedure yielded 89 items, of which those that occurred in less than four texts were eliminated and the remaining 82 were subjected to a closer functional analysis, modelled on the one proposed by Biber et al. (2004) but incorporating subcategories that were specifically developed to show the role these bundles play in the analyzed restaurant reviews.

## **4 Results and discussion**

The following section is divided into three parts, each discussing a distinct aspect of lexical variation in the analyzed restaurant reviews, respectively, keywords, key terms and lexical bundles.

### **4.1 Keywords**

Table 1 shows the 92 most frequent keywords that were assigned to six semantic-functional categories, in which they are listed in the order of decreasing keyness value.



Category	Freq	No	%	Keywords
Ingredient	1,543	37	40.22	<i>chilli, sauce, sourdough, truffle, pork, brisket, broth, steak, prawns, chile(s), pastry, fennel, salsa, cauliflower, noodles, caviar, mousse, tortillas, anchovies, scallops, roe, capers, duck, yolk, sesame, mayo, caramel, jalape, prawn, yuzu, aubergine, miso, rhubarb, bacon, beetroot, garlic</i>
Restaurant-related jargon	1,032	5	5.43	<i>dish(es), banquettes, restaurant, dessert</i>
Dish	770	22	23.91	<i>tartare, dumpling(s), taco(s), confit, tart, burger, queso, sorbet, pudding, pasta(s), bun, barbecue, ramen, biang, carnitas, salad, meringue, bao, crudo</i>
Preparation methods	625	11	11.96	<i>pickled, fried, grilled, braised, smoked, roasted, steamed, charred, seared, sliced, fermented</i>
Taste attribute	543	14	15.22	<i>crisp(y), spiced, meaty, crisped, buttery, chewy, crunch(y), salty, smoky, salted, creamy, nutty</i>
People	275	3	3.26	<i>diners, chef, waiter</i>

**Table 1: Semantic-functional classification of keywords in restaurant reviews**

The analysis of keywords revealed that the frequent mention of ingredients is the most distinctive lexical feature of the restaurant reviews under investigation, with sauce being the most frequent term (255 tokens), often modified by *fish*, *tomato* and *chocolate*. The terms include vegetables (e.g. *fennel*, *cauliflower*), types of meat (e.g. *pork*, *duck*) and their cuts (e.g. *brisket*, *bacon*), seafood (e.g. *scallops*, *roe*), fruits (e.g. *rhubarb*), spices (e.g. *chile*) and prepared food (e.g. *pastry*, *salsa*). There are also ingredients which do not fall into these categories (e.g. *sourdough*, *yolk*) as well as those that play multiple functions, such as *chilli*, which names a spice in (1) but a vegetable in (2).

- (1) *We have Nyonya pork, in a dark sauce full of cracked black pepper and sweet chilli.* (7 July\_TG)
- (2) *The cockles are topped with smoked ham and a little burnt chilli.* (6 April\_TI)

Another frequent, though not very numerous, category is restaurant-related jargon, that is, “the technical language of a special field” (Crystal 1996: 454), which comprises only five terms, including the most frequent keyword in the corpus: *restaurant* (500 tokens). The word is often modified by adjectives denoting the type of cuisine (e.g. *French*, *Chinese*, *Italian*, *Mexican*) or describing location (e.g. *Los Angeles*, *London*, *Richmond*) as well as by such general modifiers as *new*, *favourite*, *successful* and various ordinals (e.g. *first*, *second*). Frequent are

also the terms *dish* (218 tokens) and *dishes* (227 tokens), the nearest left hand collocates of which often refer to their various positive aspects (e.g. *best, beautiful, exceptional, fine, star, favourite, promising, comforting, pleasing, satisfying*) or characteristics determining the type of dish (e.g. *breakfast, chicken, fish, meat, pasta, cooked, rice, vegetable*) and less frequently to different shortcomings (e.g. *erroneous, expensive*). Such prevalence of positive over negative comments may be due to what Parikh et al. (2017) explain as expert critics' avoidance of "restaurants that are known to be of poor quality" (ibid.: 499). Generally, the mentioned terms, together with the ones categorized as people, identify the text-type as well as establish the setting and its participants, among whom *chef* (191 tokens) plays the main role. An interesting keyword is *diners* (57 tokens), which in the corpus always denoted restaurant customers, as in (3), and never a small restaurant resembling a dining car, although *banquettes*, that is, long upholstered benches put against a wall that can often be found in such places, occurred 16 times.

- (3) *Now, (demanding) diners want something new to put on their grids.* (4 Oct\_TI)

The names of dishes constitute a more diverse category, in which only meringue is definitely sweet, four terms refer to dishes that are sweet or not (e.g. *tart – apple/lobster, sorbet – mango/thyme, pudding – chocolate/black, bun – sweet brioche/burger*) and the remaining ones name dishes that provide other flavours. Two other popular categories comprise terms denoting preparation methods and taste attributes. A more in-depth analysis singled out *fried* (139 tokens) and *crisp* (116 tokens) as the most frequent items in each respective category. A closer inspection of their use showed that *fried* is most often modified by *deep* and it frequently modifies *chicken, egg(s)* and *rice*, whereas the popular nearest collocates of *crisp* include *crust, pastry, skin, onions* and *oysters* in the post-modifier position. It is also worth exploring the adjective *charred*, which refers to the fact that something has been burnt or reduced to charcoal. Yet, in the study corpus it usually carried positive connotations, as in (4).

- (4) *His thin-crust, adequately charred pizzas make good use of the artisanal wood oven (...)* (AM\_12 Feb)

## 4.2 Key terms

Table 2 shows 99 most frequent key terms that were assigned to eleven semantic-functional categories, in which they are listed in the order of decreasing keyness value.

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Category	Freq	No	%	Key terms
Ingredient	291	32	32.33	<i>pork belly, olive oil, coconut milk, fish sauce, black pepper, egg yolk, dark chocolate, salsa verde, white chocolate, bone marrow, ground beef, brown butter, garlic butter, salted caramel, sweet potato, short rib, tomato sauce, pork chop, American cheese, rice flour, wild garlic, chocolate mousse, chilli oil, chocolate sauce, blue cheese, chile oil, pork sausage, flour tortilla, black truffle, sea bream, seaweed butter, red cabbage</i>
Setting/Location	195	13	13.13	<i>dining room, open kitchen, new restaurant, next door, cocktail bar, wine bar, communal table, raw bar, front door, Chinese restaurant, other side, bar area, shopping center</i>
Dish	169	16	16.16	<i>ice cream, fried chicken, Korean barbecue, steak tartare, fried rice, duck confit, panna cotta, char siu, chicken salad, cheese sandwich, carne asada, burnt cheese, lemon meringue, Neapolitan pizza, avocado toast, long bao</i>
Restaurant-related jargon	84	9	9.09	<i>wine list, fine dining, room temperature, happy hour, restaurant scene, food truck, dessert menu, first visit, restaurant business</i>
Time reference	58	6	6.06	<i>last year, same time, long time, last month, first time, next time</i>
Impression after a restaurant visit	57	6	6.06	<i>good value, good time, good stuff, price tag, good food, good idea</i>
People	55	5	5.05	<i>executive chef, head chef, pastry chef, business partner, restaurant critic</i>
Course type	54	4	4.04	<i>dim sum, tasting menu, main course, plate lunch</i>
Food type	27	3	3.03	<i>street food, Italian food, comfort food</i>
Other	24	3	3.03	<i>awful lot, other hand, whole thing</i>
Beverage	13	2	2.02	<i>red wine, white wine</i>

Table 2: Semantic-functional classification of key terms in restaurant reviews

Four of the above categories are the same as those applied to keywords, but add more fine-grained details to the overall picture of linguistic variation in the specialized discourse under investigation. For example, in the category of ingredients, semantic distinctions are drawn between different types of sauce: *fish sauce, tomato sauce* or *chocolate sauce*. Similarly, reference is made to either *white* or *dark chocolate* as well as to *brown, garlic* or *seaweed butter*. *Olive oil* (19 tokens), which is a universal ingredient, is more frequently mentioned than the more elaborate *chilli oil* (7 tokens) or its alternative version, *chile oil* (6 tokens).

Interesting culinary details are also highlighted in the category of dishes, in which *ice cream* (33 tokens) is the most outstanding key term in reference to the enTenTen15 corpus. Considering the apparent unpopularity of sweet dishes in the group of keywords, strong presence of such phrases as the one mentioned as well as *panna cotta* and *lemon meringue* explicitly indicates that a critic's visit to a restaurant actually involves a dessert. This impression is enhanced by the term *dessert menu* in the category of restaurant-related jargon, which additionally makes it clear that scanning a *wine list* adds to the experience of *fine dining* that allows a given food establishment to make its mark on the restaurant scene and achieve success in the *restaurant business*.

The above interpretation reflects how the mentioned key terms are used in the restaurant reviews examined as well as shows that the evaluation these texts present focuses not only on the experience of eating but also of dining. Frequent use of setting/location terms indicates that the critic's attention concentrates on the restaurant's interior (e.g. *dining room*, *open kitchen*, *cocktail bar*, *communal table*, *bar area*) and neighborhood (e.g. *shopping centre*). Additionally, reference is made to impressions after a restaurant visit, which are dominated by the adjective *good* (e.g. *good food/time/stuff*), and to the moment in time when the visit was paid (e.g. *last year/month*, *long time*). Mention is also made of price factors (e.g. *good value*, *price tag*), which is in contrast with Williamson et al.'s (2009) finding that discussions of value are largely absent in restaurant reviews. By comparison, the use of *next time* in (5) implies that writing restaurant reviews is a continuing process that involves many occasions on which the restaurant menu is tasted.

- (5) *Next time I come – and there will be a next time – I am gagging to try the crab, brown shrimp and (...)* (7 July\_TG)

The other categories of recurrent key terms testify to the fact that the evaluated restaurant visit is a total experience. Dishes and ingredients become discursively linked to course and food types, the responsibility for which rests with different types of chef: *executive*, *head* or *pastry*. The analysis of key terms also highlighted the presence of lexis relating to the consumption of drinks, such as the names of beverages (*red/white wine*), places where they are served (*cocktail/wine bar*, *bar area*) and the menu they are chosen from (*wine list*). Interestingly, all these phrases are semantically related to alcoholic drinks, which may indicate that restaurant reviews emphasize those aspects of dining out that make this experience exceptional in comparison with the typical meals people enjoy at home. This seems to be further evidenced by many special or unfamiliar

food terms, such as *duck confit* or *black truffle*, some of which are non-English, for instance, *char siu*, *carne asada*, *dim sum* or *long bao*. These two findings reflect the trend observed by Williamson et al. (2009: 60), who found that comments on wine as well as “‘uncommon’ (or at least what could be considered ‘non-everyday’) food items” and “rare food products” are strongly favoured by restaurant critics.

Finally, although the factor of the geographical variation of English was not investigated in the study, it is worth noting that certain terms, such as *chile oil* or *carne asada*, were found only in the reviews written by American critics. This finding opens avenues for future research on the potential relationship between the language variety factor and the selection of salient vocabulary and phraseology in professional restaurant reviews written in English.

### 4.3 Lexical bundles

Following Biber et al.’s (2004) taxonomy, the most frequent 4-word bundles (N=82) were classified into three main functional categories: referential expressions, discourse organizers and stance expressions which were further subdivided into more fine-grained subcategories. The bundles that most distinctly reflect the specificity of the analyzed restaurant reviews are shown below in their respective tables, in which they are listed in the order of decreasing frequency.

The most numerous category comprises 50 referential bundles (60.98%) referring to ideas, entities and concepts, either to identify them or mention their important attributes. Depending on their specific functions and meanings in the study corpus, referential bundles were grouped into six subcategories shown in Table 3.

Subcategory	Freq	No	Bundle
Location	128	18	<i>of the restaurant’s, in the dining room, in the middle of, the middle of the, the bottom of the, the back of the, on top of a, in the restaurant’s, the main dining room, the center of the, on the other side, on the edge of, of the dining room, in the center of, at the bottom of, an open kitchen and, the other side of, out of the kitchen</i>
Specifying attributes	83	11	<i>the rest of the, one of the best, one of the most, at # for a, a bit of a, an awful lot of, the size of a, some of the best, many of the dishes, in the shadow of, with just the right</i>
Attributes of a dish	48	7	<i>and served with a, in a puddle of, with a bowl of, with a side of, with a scoop of, there’s also a, it comes with a</i>
Identification/ focus	45	7	<i>is one of the, is one of those, then there’s the, the restaurant’s name, one of them is, from the team behind, the à la carte</i>

Subcategory	Freq	No	Bundle
Temporal	32	5	<i>at the same time, over the past few, the past few years, on my first visit, most of the time</i>
Multi-functional reference	17	2	<i>at the end of, the end of the</i>

**Table 3: Referential bundles in restaurant reviews**

Location bundles are very frequent and typically refer to some location in the restaurant, which is either explicitly mentioned in the bundle (e.g. *in the dining room, in the restaurant's, an open kitchen and*) or can be derived from the context (e.g. *the back of the, the center of the*), as in (6). Sometimes reference is also made to different parts of kitchenware (7), the served dishes (8) or some places named in the review (9).

- (6) *From this counter-size portal on **the other side** of the restaurant's cocktail bar; (...)* (2 Sept\_LAT)
- (7) *By the time the fork scrapes **the bottom of the plate**, (...)* (29 Mar\_TPM)
- (8) *The meats are plated **on top of a thick bed of rice**, (...)* (28 Jun\_TPM)
- (9) *I'm on Maddox Street on the edge of London's Mayfair; (...)* (16 Jun\_TG)

Bundles specifying attributes determine quantity (10), size (11), quality (12) or other specific characteristics (13) of the following noun, including price (14).

- (10) *I've eaten **an awful lot of** beetroot over the past few years.* (22 Sept\_TG)
- (11) *Take the "Cioccolato": a glossy chocolate sphere **the size of a** Christmas ornament plated on a bed of devil's food crumbs.* (30 Sept\_TPM)
- (12) *But the lavender chamomile soda was **one of the most** interesting drinks I've tried this summer.* (22 Jul\_TPM)
- (13) *(...) and then another stupidly encouraging cream, butter sauce **with just the right** punch of acidity.* (17 Feb\_TG)
- (14) *House wines begin **at £18.50 for a** bottle of Las Condes Sauvignon Blanc (...)* (5 Jul\_TG)

Additionally, there are bundles, whose function is to identify the attributes of a dish, as illustrated in the examples below. Considering the frequency of all attributive bundles, they constitute the most common referential expressions in the study corpus, with the total of 131 occurrences.

- (15) *The fish sat **in a puddle of** green and burgundy jus.* (1 Nov\_TG)
- (16) *That bread is Mr. Easton's, too. **It comes with a** lot of things, and it is excellent.* (8 Oct\_NYT)
- (17) *How about turbot in seaweed butter **with a side of** buttered jersey royals with soft herbs?* (21 Jun\_TG)
- (18) *Beautiful, smoked Portuguese sardines are served in their tin can, along with pickled quail eggs from Alabama, (...) **There's also a** generous helping of marinated olives tossed with (...)* (8 Aug\_AM)

Identification/focus bundles direct the readers' attention to what follows the bundle, for instance, by identifying the subgroup to which it belongs (19) or naming more precisely the following noun (20). Some bundles simply focus on the concept which they introduce into the text, as in (21), and are therefore sometimes categorized as discourse organizers (see e.g. Cortes 2004) that help to identify or start a topic. In fact, the boundaries between the functional categories of bundles are not clearly demarcated, as for example, Biber and Barbieri (2007: 271) classify identification/focus bundles as discourse organizers, simultaneously defining their function as "referential identification/focus". Since the present study follows Biber et al.'s (2004) taxonomy, the bundles in question are treated as referential.

- (19) *The beef tartare **is one of the** larger dishes and much lighter than the previous.* (4 Oct\_TI)
- (20) *While the roe deer terrine (...) comes from **the à la carte** menu and (...)* (6 Sept\_TI)
- (21) *First, **the restaurant's name**, because names are very important: Jolene.* (1 Feb\_TG)

Two less popular categories of referential bundles are those concerned with time deixis and the ones that are multi-functional. The former refers either to particular moments in time, such as the one determined by a visit to a restaurant in (22), or somewhat less definite periods, as in (23). The latter are represented by only two items, which can function as either a location (*a four-spigot absinthe fountain **at the end of** the bar*) or temporal bundle (*opened **at the end of** last year*). Single cases of multi-functionality were also observed for some of the other bundles discussed here; thus, it is important to note that the functional labels applied in the tables are generalizations reflecting the primary functions these bundles serve in most of their contexts of use in the study corpus.

- (22) *On my first visit, I had a bored-looking server who offered little insight into the menu.* (30 May\_TPM)
- (23) *Yet the local restaurant that has intrigued me the most over **the past few years** is a fast-food Lazarus, (...)* (10 Jul\_LAT)

Discourse-organizing bundles, which introduce, clarify, elaborate or focus on topics, include 18 items (21.95%) that were divided into two subcategories shown in Table 4.

Subcategory	Freq	No	Bundle
Topic elaboration	106	16	<i>in a way that, which is to say, turns out to be, on the other hand, turned out to be, 's the kind of, it's the kind, out to be a, but it's not, for the most part, but it's also, is meant to be, is a sort of, is a plate of, as well as the, it's also a</i>
Topic introduction	13	2	<i>when it comes to, I went to the</i>

**Table 4: Discourse-organizing bundles in restaurant reviews**

The majority of discourse organizers serve to elaborate or clarify a topic in the analyzed texts. This often involves providing alternative terms for the concepts discussed (24), explaining the composition of exotic dishes (25) or adding the relevant details (26).

- (24) *The steamed bean-curd-wrapped beef balls (**which is to say**: meatballs) are crazy tender; (...)* (2 Sept\_LAT)
- (25) *(...) the tarta de la casa the day we are there is a mel i mato tart, which **is a sort of** bottomless cheesecake made with artisanal cheese from Girona strewn with honey and nuts.* (16 Aug\_TG)
- (26) *Alewife's open kitchen employs fish without catch limits, (...), **as well as the** fish heads and tails that are often tossed out.* (16 Jan\_RM)

Topic introducing bundles are less popular and include only two items. *I went to the* always appears in one of the first few sentences of the restaurant reviews, as in (27), whereas *when it comes to* often serves as a point of departure for undertaking a new aspect of what is discussed in the text, as illustrated by (28). It is worth noting that the former bundle also serves a narrative function, indicating that a review is not simply a description of the food that is served, but involves a chronologically ordered sequence of events that together make up the dining experience.



- (27) *I went to the launch party, which was jolly and full of fit Euros, because the restaurant is owned by Big Mamma, a glitzy Parisian group.* (10 Apr\_TI)
- (28) *I try as many dishes as possible. But when it comes to the food at My Village Grill, (...), I know I'm missing some culinary touchstones.* (29 Aug\_TPM)

The least numerous but fairly diversified is the category of stance bundles, with 14 items (17.07%) grouped into five subcategories. As can be seen from Table 6, such expressions convey attitudes, assessments or feelings towards the propositional content of the text.

Subcategory	Freq	No	Bundle
Attitudinal/modality (desire)	32	4	<i>don't want to, I don't want, if you want to, if you don't</i>
Attitudinal/modality (evaluative)	30	4	<i>as it should be, in all the right, it's easy to, all the right places</i>
Epistemic	22	3	<i>I'm not sure, I don't know, could have been a</i>
Attitudinal/modality (intention)	13	2	<i>you're going to, I'm going to</i>
Ability	5	1	<i>can't help but</i>

Table 5: Stance bundles in restaurant reviews

Attitudes classified as desire are the most frequent and usually relate to wishes regarding certain details of a restaurant visit. These are either the critic's own desires (29) or the ones attributed to the readers of the review, giving them some advice on how to make their dining out experience unforgettable (30).

- (29) *I don't want to eat in a "theatre", just as I don't want to eat in a library or a crematorium (...)* (6 Sept\_TI)
- (30) *If you want to sample the finest collection of pastries in Los Angeles, join the line.* (19 Sept\_LAT)

Two other interesting bundles have been subcategorized as evaluative. *As it should be* often conveys a positive attitude towards the food (31), but sometimes also towards the entire restaurant visit (32). This is also the case with *all the right places*, as can be seen, respectively, in (33) and (32).

- (31) *The meringue is crisp and chewy as it should be (...)* (20 Jan\_TG)
- (32) *When eating there everything is as it should be: attentive in all the right places, (...)* (2 Jun\_TG)

- (33) *Boned chicken thighs are marinated in (...) and are buttery and rich in **all the right places**.* (16 Jun\_TG)

Epistemic stance bundles are mostly personal and concerned with uncertainty (*I'm not sure, I don't know*), but one expresses possibility (34), whereas those expressing intention relate either to the critic (*I'm going to*) or the readers (*you're going to*), similarly as (*I/you can't help but*), which often conveys the inability to refrain from positive opinions about the restaurant or some of its aspects, as in (35).

- (34) *(...) not just that space to the right of reception which, in another life, **could have been a function room** (...)* (6 Jan\_TG)

- (35) *You **can't help but** feel relaxed hanging out here.* (8 Aug\_AM)

## 5 Conclusion

This study has applied corpus linguistics methodology to examine recurrent lexical and phraseological patterns in a specialized corpus of restaurant reviews written in English by professional critics. The results have shown the lexical prevalence of ingredients over other categories of single words and multi-word terms, which indicates that in the text variety investigated the focus is not simply on the consumption of ready-to-eat dishes but also on what they are made of and how they are prepared. Actually, a restaurant visit is shown in its totality, as a whole that includes the realities of location, time, people, sensation, and particularly food in all its guises and tastes. This experience of eating as well as dining is presented as a narrative with its own micro-structure signaled by discourse-organizing bundles. The latter, however, do not overshadow aspects of the referential content that additionally incorporates more expert-like details, such as exotic or non-English terms, the inclusion of which creates the impression that dining out is exciting or even exceptional, especially given the frequency of mention of special occasion drinks like wine. What may surprise in the context of an evaluative text genre, which the restaurant review represents, is the limited presence of stance devices and other attitudinal items among the most salient lexical features. A possible explanation could be that the critic resorts from taking strong positions in favour of other means of expression, such as photographs visualizing selected elements of the mainstream text. Also, many of the keywords and key terms are so vivid and picturesque, for instance *buttery* or *chocolate mousse*, that they speak for themselves. This, in turn, reduces the need for an additional evaluation of the propositional content of the review by the critic.

Despite some limitations, such as the subjectivity involved in the process of writing a review and the intuitive nature of the semantic-functional categories proposed for the analyzed items, the findings of this study give an insight into the lexis and phraseologies that are typical of professional restaurant reviews written in English. The presented descriptive data can serve pedagogical purposes in the context of linguistic training for food-related professions, including food journalism, as they provide authentic domain-specific knowledge that constitutes an integral part of attractive and practical teaching materials. Future research could look more closely at the concordances and collocates of selected words and phrases to identify other interesting grammatical and lexical properties of recurrent patterns of language use in the text variety under consideration. It could be also worth investigating the extent to which the geographical variation of English, understood as its British and American varieties, influences the patterns of use of key vocabulary and phraseology in restaurant reviews.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> Contractions (e.g. *don't*) were considered as two orthographic words or tokens, therefore, sequences such as *I don't want* were treated as 4-word bundles.

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