

Storytelling and synthetic personalization in television cooking shows



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Abstract

Television cooking shows provide a platform for discussion about food, with storytelling emerging as a way to share and interpret experiences. Within the last twenty years, interest in food has soared with television channels devoted exclusively to food and cooking, nationally and internationally, reaching millions of viewers. Entertaining and educating simultaneously, cooking show hosts weave storytelling in recipe telling, engaging the viewer and creating an “ordinary” persona. Drawing on Labov’s narrative theory and Fairclough’s synthetic personalization, the paper analyzes the formal structure of stories and the legitimation strategies of amateur celebrity chefs within the discursive framework of the cooking show event. Specifically, storytelling in instructional cooking shows from the Food Network provides a resource for cooking show hosts to construct themselves as authorities in cooking but at the same time as equals to the viewers.

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1. Introduction

Within the last twenty years, interest in food has experienced an international boom with television channels devoted exclusively to food and cooking, including *Cuisine TV* in France, *Lifestyle Food* in Australia, U.K. *Food*, and the *Food Network* and the *Cooking Channel* in the U.S. The American channels will be discussed in the following paper. The cooking shows range from competitions, reality shows, and travelogs, to its most traditional form of how-to-cook with hosts instructing viewers about how to buy, prepare, and consume food. Cooking shows provide a platform for discussion about food with stories from cooking show hosts emerging as ways to entertain and educate viewers to become— ‘edutainment’ (Moseley, 2000; de Solier, 2005) and ‘foodtainment’ (Finkelstein, 1999). During recipe instruction, hosts weave in stories, a form of narrative that is marked by distinctive linguistic and structural components (Cotter, 1997; Labov, 1972; Norrick, 2011; Ochs and Capps, 1996; Polyani, 1982). For instance, Polyani (1982) demonstrates how the speaker collapses the real world and story world with unexpected pronouns (e.g. “I baked *this* cookie batter”) while Ochs and Capps (1996) explore how personal narrative is constituted by temporality and point of view. Narrative provides a means for sharing and interpreting experiences, and in the context of cooking shows, storytelling works to establish credibility for the chef and create intimacy between the show host and audience.

This paper aims to analyze storytelling in instructional cooking shows, pointing out its interactions with recipe telling and cooking demonstration, and its overall purpose in the show. More specifically, storytelling establishes the chef’s

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authority and presents the chef as a relatable, “ordinary” celebrity, connecting the show host with the audience or at-home viewer. The work of Norman Fairclough (2001) recognizes how uses of language that are typical in marketing have crept into informative language, e.g. storytelling in instructional cooking shows. One characteristic that Fairclough formulates is “synthetic personalization,” which describes the appearance of direct concern for the individual *en masse* by the mass media. In synthetic personalization, discursive techniques, such as the use of the second person and relaying of stories, along with the presentation of self, create an intimate exchange with the viewer in a fictitious dialog. How celebrity chefs construct synthetic personalization will be considered in the analysis. The following questions guide the study:

1. What are the characteristics of storytelling on cooking shows?
2. How does storytelling serve to construct a celebrity chef as ordinary?

To study narrative in television cooking shows, the paper will note how stories are shaped by the nature of the cooking show event itself and the constructed interaction between the host and the imagined viewer. The conversation is not “ordinary” in comparison to other speech events that are private, non-mediated, and with present recipients; yet, the conversation is made “natural” with stories arising during recipe instruction, especially during talk about the food that cooking show hosts are currently making. Stories on cooking shows are told simultaneously to cooking, making the discourse distinct from other storytelling forms in media (e.g. newspapers, Bell, 1994). The chef moves around the kitchen, preparing and cooking food, ordinary everyday activities, while relaying a story. To distinguish a story from recipe instruction, distinctive linguistic strategies are used, which will be explored below.

2. Methodology

The purpose of this research is to analyze the discourse of storytelling in contemporary American cooking shows through the frameworks of pragmatics and interactional sociolinguistics, focusing on how storytelling is a linguistic resource used by celebrity chefs to relate to the home viewer. Data consists of programs shown on the *Food Network* and *Cooking Channel* and made available on the channels’ websites: www.foodnetwork.com and www.cookingchannel.com, which allow for replaying, transcribing, and selective viewing. While there are various types of cooking shows (e.g. competition, reality, travel, how-to), instructional cooking show programs are the main focus of this analysis since storytelling is an important component of this genre of cooking shows and centers around the presenter. The hosts are referred to by their first names, as most viewers recognize them by such, and illustrates synthetic personalization. The excerpts selected exemplify typical storytelling segments and are of particular relevance as they feature hosts who rely on their charisma rather than culinary chops to legitimize their authority.

3. Analysis

3.1. Storytelling structure on cooking shows

Storytelling on cooking shows can be characterized with the framework proposed by Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Labov (1972) in which formal linguistic properties are identified and related to their functions. The six-part narrative components include: (1) *abstract*, which summarizes the upcoming story, (2) *orientation*, which sets the scene, (3) *complicating actions*, which propels the story ahead, (4) *resolution*, or ending of the story, (5) *evaluation*, which draws attention to the most unusual aspect of the story, and (6) *coda*, a final comment that connects the story to the ‘real world’ and present moment. Not all components are necessary for a story, but a story has a minimum of two clauses, typically the complicating action and resolution (Thornborrow and Coates, 2005, p. 4). An evaluation is also essential in providing the purpose and ‘so what’ of the telling, but as Polyani (1979) and Tannen (1984) note, the point is strongly dependent on the social, cultural, and personal contexts. In this case, the televised format also needs to be taken into account to understand the context in which the story and cooking takes place.

While Labov’s narrative concepts have been applied to other social settings, including written text (e.g. Bell’s (1994) analysis of newspaper stories; Cotter’s (1997) analysis of cookbook recipes), few if any have been linked to cooking shows. Cotter’s analysis of cookbooks indicates that the assumed culinary proficiency of the reader determines the detail and precision of the instructions. Recipes that are more explicit and detailed are for a general audience while briefer, more implicit instruction are intended for a special readership (symmetrical, peer-to-peer relationship, e.g. women’s church group). Similarly, my findings on tv cooking shows demonstrate varied amounts of instruction, with some arguably just for entertainment (e.g. reality shows like *The Next Food Network Star*; travel shows like *Diners, Drive-ins, and Dives*), while others range from creatively combining convenience foods (e.g. Sandra Lee’s *Sandra Lee’s Semi-Homemade Cooking*) to multiple-staged, complex cooking (e.g. Tyler Florence’s *Tyler’s Ultimate*). As it is increasingly common for tv celebrity

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