Research Report

Disputing taste: food pleasure as an achievement in interaction☆

Petra Sneijder *, Hedwig F.M. te Molder

Department of Social Sciences, Wageningen University, Communication Science, P.O. Box 8130, 6700 EW, Wageningen, The Netherlands

Abstract

While identity has been a dominant topic in research on food choice, literature on identity in consumers' everyday life is scarce. In this article we draw on insights from discursive psychology to demonstrate how members of an online forum on food pleasure handle the hedonic appreciation of food in everyday interaction. We examined 40 discussions consisting of 1715 e-mails related to culinary topics. The analysis focuses on the way in which the participants of this forum work up and establish their identities as 'gourmets'. A dominant tool in performing this identity work is the discursive construction of independent access to knowledge of and experience with food items, so as to compete with or resist the epistemic superiority of a preceding evaluation. Data are presented with nine examples of the 73 manifestations of the construction of independent access. Contrary to sensory approaches to food choice, this study depicts the enjoyment of food as an interactional achievement rather than a pure physiological sensation. Wider implications of this study for the relation between food, identity and taste are discussed.
© 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Discursive psychology; Discourse; Identity; Food choice; Taste; Hedonism

Introduction

In this article, we are drawing on insights from discursive psychology and conversation analysis to develop an analysis of natural online interactions of self-declared 'food-lovers'. Our aim is to shed light on the discursive procedures that are used by participants in an online forum on food pleasure to achieve ownership of taste. They do so by claiming the right to know what good food entails rather than constructing their enjoyment of food as a subjective experience. Within and through these interactional practices, participants construct their identities as 'gourmets'.

We focus on how participants negotiate their relative rights to evaluate food items or practices (cf. Heritage & Raymond, 2005). For this purpose, we examine interaction sequences in which an evaluative assessment of a particular food item is being offered to which other participants subsequently respond. We will demonstrate that participants in the so-called 'second assessment position' make an effort to construct their evaluations as independently arrived at, where they otherwise

could simply agree with previous speakers. Before presenting our analytic results, we will provide some background to the topic of food and identity and argue how discursive psychology may shed new light on this relationship.

Food and identity

The relationship between identity-formation and food consumption has become firmly established in the social sciences. At the same time, however, the concept of 'social identity' has lost much of its clarity. In the post-modern world in which our daily decisions regarding what to eat are determined by a wealth of options and by rapid economic and technological change, consumer identities seem fragmented and relatively unpredictable (cf. Gabriel & Lang, 1995). Furthermore, food products are not as recognisable in terms of taste, smell or texture as they used to be. Food technology makes it possible for producers to imitate natural or traditional foods and average consumers seem less aware of production methods and the origin of food items in the stores (Fischler, 1988). Decisions about what to eat and the corresponding identity work seem more rooted in product imagery than in actual food ingredients. With 'healthy products' being promoted by reference to their taste and 'convenience foods' being marketed as healthy, it is becoming increasingly difficult to speak of a one-to-one relationship between food consumption and identity.

Traditional approaches to food and identity no longer seem adequate to capture this kind of complexity. Food consumption

has long been treated as a symbol of membership of specific social identity groups. A range of studies have emphasised its role as a marker of differences in gender, class and ethnicity (for example Charles & Kerr, 1988; Douglas, 1984). Mennell, Murcott, & Van Otterloo (1992, p. 54) define the categories social class, age and sex as 'the pre-sociological baseline for explanations of social and cultural bases for the social distribution of 'choice', 'habit' or 'taste' (…)'. In the past decade, however, researchers from different social scientific disciplines have come to acknowledge the decreasing value of socio-demographic factors as predictors of present consumption patterns (cf. Caplan, 1997; Crouch & O'Neill, 2000; Fischler, 1988; Lindeman & Sirelius, 2001; Lindeman & Stark, 1999). Both the a priori relevance and the consistency of these identity factors have been overestimated.

As a response to such considerations, social theorists (for example Giddens, 1991) have introduced the concept of lifestyle, referring to the choices that people constantly make in their everyday lives. Consumers actively create their identity by choosing certain products over others, rather than conforming to food practices prescribed by particular social groups. Indicating a cultural rather than a structural pattern, the concept of lifestyle—or consumer lifestyle—partly resolves the rigidity of more traditional divisions. However, (see also Murcott, 2000) the lifestyle approach is not concerned with the way in which identities are formulated, reformulated and managed in everyday life for particular *interactional purposes*, by social members themselves.

In recent years, consumer researchers have begun to examine new consumer communities on the Internet, focusing on identities, values and motives, mainly using ethnographic research methods. 'Nethnography' (Kozinets, 2002) takes into account the interaction dynamics between members of consumption-orientated communities and focuses on the communicative acts performed by participants (for instance 'sharing knowledge'). However, analytic observations are frequently based upon the content of what is said rather than the way in which talk is constructed and especially how it is used. In this article we analyse online interaction by drawing on a perspective that focuses on the fine-grained detail of interaction sequences (see also Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003). It examines discourse as being constructed and action oriented. This perspective allows us to study the discursive procedures by which members of an online community on food pleasure manage their relative rights and responsibilities to evaluate food.

Discursive psychology: discursive identities and evaluative practices

As mentioned, a specific concern of discursive psychology is the action-orientation of naturally occurring discourse (Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; te Molder, 1999; te Molder & Potter, 2005). Rather than treating discourse as a result of underlying cognitive processes, it is analysed as social practice. Applied to the study of everyday discourse on eating practices, it has been shown how people hold each other accountable for taste preferences in mealtime

interaction (Wiggins, 2004) and how participants in online discussions on veganism resist the potentially health-threatening and complicated nature of the vegan lifestyle, for instance by presenting themselves as ordinary persons (Sneijder & te Molder, 2004).

From a discursive psychological perspective, identity is looked at as an achievement and a tool. Identities are part of everyday routine and as such used for a range of interactional purposes. They become visible as a demonstration of or an ascription to membership of a whole range of possible categories, such as 'man', 'student' or 'ordinary person', which are inference-rich and therefore associated with particular kinds of behaviour, the so-called category-bound activities (Sacks, 1992). However, the connection between identity and activity is not simply there but a part of participants' interactional achievements. Success is not guaranteed: membership needs to be worked up and people can fail to be treated as being a member of a certain category (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Potter, 1996).

An important feature of identity work is the kind of 'entitlement' that identities may provide for. A witness to a car accident may have a specific entitlement to feel awful (Sacks, 1992), and a friend may be entitled to have intimate knowledge about the one he is friendly with. Again, these are negotiable rather than fixed or mechanical features of identities. In analytical terms, only those categories and category entitlements count which are made relevant and oriented to by participants themselves and which have a visible outcome in the interaction (Schegloff, 1991).

The role of evaluative practices in identity work

This paper deals with the ways in which participants manage their relative rights to evaluate taste in online discussions on food pleasure. Evaluative assessments implicate the speaker's knowledge of or access to the referent he or she is assessing and thereby indicate the speaker's right to perform an evaluation (Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Heritage, 2005). However, being the first to evaluate a referent implies having independent rights to perform the evaluation, whereas evaluations of the same referent in second positions imply 'secondary' or relative rights (Heritage & Raymond, 2005).

Producers of second assessments may work at undermining the suggestion that their right to evaluate an event, object or person is secondary to the first speaker's, especially when they are members of a category that is associated with knowledge of or access to the evaluated item (for example parents with their children). Speakers can use several discursive procedures to present their second assessments as 'independently arrived at'. Heritage and Raymond (2005) identified four devices that are used to claim the socio-epistemic rights that are bound to specific identities. These devices construct second assessments as independent of first assessments:

1. producing a confirmation before an agreement, which constructs the action of agreeing as a matter of lower priority (e.g. 'how beautiful'—'that is beautiful, yes')