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The Waffle House: A Lesson in Discourse Community

A discourse community may be defined in a number of ways, but it is perhaps best defined by the linguist John Swales as “a group of individuals that share goals or purposes, and use communication to achieve those goals or purposes.” A discourse community may be observed in a gym, a church, a restaurant, or many other places. It was quite difficult for me to decide which discourse community to observe, but I chose to partake in a very unique, but casual discourse community known as the Waffle House. I began my educational adventure when I walked into the Festus Waffle House as if I belonged there and took a seat in a booth by my father, a “regular” to the restaurant, who graciously agreed to both be interviewed and observed as a representation of this community. I made my first round of observations by quickly glancing around the restaurant and simply jotting down everything stationary I see: a colorful jukebox; large windows surrounding us on three sides; a large and elongate kitchen open for all to view; old orange and brown booths, chairs, and tables; and many dimly lit large and spherical light fixtures. Although I had been to the Waffle House many times before, I had never taken a moment to survey or appreciate my surroundings in such detail. With that attention to detail and several hours of observation/analysis I was able to determine that the Festus Waffle House has a very unique set of characteristics when it comes to intercommunication and lexis, intertextual references, and goals and expertise which separates it from any other existing discourse community.

After making myself comfortable across from my father and surveying my surroundings, my attention is drawn to the intercommunication taking place between my father and three other regulars that are present on this particular night. Without hesitation my dad introduces me to Dave, Tom, and Gary, the three present regulars and coincidently the regulars to whom he is most acquainted. I find myself marveling at the fact that, although they know one another quite well, each individual sat at least a couple of booths away from the others and still somehow managed to hold conversations as if they were in the vicinity of the same small booth. Their communication was entirely verbal and they spoke loudly, light heartedly, and casually to each other at intermittent intervals. I noticed that they unknowingly seemed to have an automated greeting regimen for any regular just arriving. As the regular would walk in the door each one of the seated regulars would say “Hey, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. How’s it going bud/pal?” and then the regular would always respond with something along the lines of “Oh, not too bad, how ‘bout yourself?” and then they would all do a quick nod at one another.

The regulars talked about a multitude of things while I observed them, but almost everything was in a lexis that I barely understood. It seemed that I could pick up on the topics of which they spoke: cars, heavy machinery, their occupations, but rarely ever understood the jargon surrounding that topic without interrupting to ask. The main topic of the evening seemed to be cars. They talked about new cars, old cars, car shows they had attended, and things about cars I had never even heard of. Their conversation went something like: Tom, while tapping his spoon on the rim of his coffee cup asks, “Did you guys see that Larry has a T-bucket?” Gary, while nodding exclaims, “Yeah I saw when he came in last week. And did ya know Dale’s Pony hasn’t been running well? Something wrong with the clutch.” My father then adds, “Hope it doesn’t give him too much trouble, he put a lot of work and, not to mention, a new six pack into that old restomod.” Because I wasn’t up to date on my car lingo I would be lying if I said I wasn’t inclined to think that Larry had some sort of large special container for tea and that Dale made his horse drink an entire case of alcohol. I suppose my puzzled expression exposed my confusion, however, because they all looked at me and sort of chuckled before explaining that a T-bucket is an old Model-T Ford that has had its fenders ripped off and a new V8 engine put inside it, a “Pony” is a Ford Mustang that has that long hood and short trunk, a vehicle has a six pack if three two-barrel carburetors are installed on its engine and a restomod is an old classic car with its original exterior intact, but a refurbished interior with updated technology.

After listening to the regulars for a while I directed my attention to the communication between the staff working that night. Their communication differed slightly from the intercommunication of the regulars as it was a mixture of both casual and formal dialogue. My father introduced me to all four members of the staff that evening—four girls fairly close to my age and whose names I can’t recall. Three of the girls were waitresses and one of the girls was the cook. Our particular waitress, a short girl with curly brown hair and blue eyes knew my dad well enough that she did not have to ask if she could start him off with a drink, she simply instantaneously brought out a cup of coffee with two creamers and a shaker of sugar without ever having to inquire.

The staff seemed to be quite used to shouting orders back and forth to each other when it was busy and chit-chatting about non-work related stories when it was slow. They also communicated with written language at times when they wrote orders down on the order pad to pass along as reminders to each other. On this particular night two of the waitresses and the cook seemed to be caught up on their work with only my dad, Dave, Tom, and Gary’s coffee cups to refill so they spoke freely about their daily lives until work would pick back up again. Just like the regulars had their own lexis, the staff also had their own lexis in order to make their tasks easier. Possibly the most famous example of this lexis is the famous code names for the available toppings on the hashbrowns. As the main genre (the menu) depicts, a customer may have their hasbrowns: “covered” with cheese, “smothered” with onions, “chunked” with ham, “capped” with mushrooms, “topped” with chili, and many more. I also found out that when a customer says “Give me some Bert’s!,” they want the waitress to bring them some of the restaurant’s famous chili. Apart from these, the staff also had other types of lexis that were not available on the menu to customers such as the term “pull a bacon” which indicates to the cook to fry up exactly 3 strips of bacon. The term “pull a half a bacon,” however, does not instruct the cook a strip and a half of bacon, as one might imagine, but instead defies all laws of math and will result in the frying of 2 strips of bacon.

Somewhere muddled in between all of the intercommunication there were many intertextual references used by both the regulars and the staff. I was initially unable to pick up any of these brief instances of references to outside material, but later after much revision of notes and review of scenarios I uncovered many of them. It seemed that most of these intertextual references were focused either on television or politics. One of the waitresses that worked there that night would exclaimed “Wax on, Wax off!” (and apparently does this regularly) while washing the windows and doing a clockwise motion with her right hand followed by a counterclockwise motion with her left hand just as Mr. Miyagi teaches his pupil Daniel in the 1984 classic “The Karate Kid.” There were also references used by the staff when one “screwed up” so to speak. When others screwed up they would quote the famous 80s movie “Sandlot” by exclaiming “You’re killin’ me Smalls!” and when they themselves made a mistake they would exclaim “Thanks Obama!” as a way of sort of making fun of those individuals who blame the government for everything wrong in their lives. I couldn’t help but laugh when one of the waitresses that night even “thanked” the president when it started to rain.

The regulars were no exception when it came to the use of intertextual references as the nicknames they gave each other often referenced outside content. Although none of the nicknames were particularly clever and for the most part only served to distinguish two regulars with the same name, they still seemed quite funny and interesting to me. Some individuals had nicknames that referenced their hobbies and outside lives such as my dad’s nickname “Airplane Alan” or “AA” because of his hobby for flying or “Lawnmower Dave” who repairs lawnmowers for a living. Others had nicknames that reflected their appearance or dress like “Harry Potter” a cook who had thick black circular glasses like J.K. Rowling’s loveable wizard or “Muscle Dave” who has never worn anything other than muscle shirts—even in winter. There was also “Home Depot” who surprisingly enough works at the Home Depot, “Lowe’s” who as you might have guessed, works at Lowe’s,“Bear” who is a 6’6” bouncer with a noticeable large tattoo of a bear on his neck, and “Chucky” who has deeply blue and almost creepy eyes similar to the doll that comes to life the from the horror movies.

After my dad, his friends, and I finished laughing and discussing the ridiculous nicknames they had concocted for each other I was able to determine Swales’ last two important characteristic of discourse community for both the staff and the regulars—the goals and expertise. The staff had fairly clear or obvious goals that nearly anyone could decipher. The goals of the waitresses were to make their customers happy with their service, which ultimately leads larger tips and returning customers. It also seemed that the waitresses strived to be thorough and quick with orders so that they were both correct and served on time. The cook, on the other hand, had to make both her fellow waitresses and the customers happy in an attempt to keep everything running smoothly. Like with any job, all of the staff that night probably just wanted to get through their shifts with as few mishaps as possible and with their sanity still intact. The expertise was also fairly clear to discern. One waitress was the novice, the newest waitress to join who was still “learning the ropes” so to speak. The other waitresses who had worked there significantly longer period of time and had to serve as educators to the newer waitress until she learned to do all of the tasks on her own. The expert of the night was undoubtedly the cook. Like the others, she once started out as a waitress and had to work her way up to her current title. She made significantly more money per hour than the others and in return had significantly more responsibilities and skills when it came to the job at hand.

The regulars’ goals and expertise were far more vague and inconspicuous than that of the employees. The regulars seemed to gather at this location in order to relax. The Waffle House to them is a discourse community that provides a sort of therapeutic activity in which they can interact with others by sharing similar interests and problems. They used the Waffle House as a means to unwind and break away from the troubles of their day. They also used it as a means to bounce ideas off one another and gain advice about various things. There were not clear experts and novices when it came to the regulars as they were all experts in their own way. My father was considered the expert on airplanes, Dave made a living knowing lawnmowers on lawnmowers, Gary knew almost everything there is to know about motorcycles, and so on and so on. They all brought their own expertise to the table which, I concluded, is inevitably why they work so well as a team or as a sort of support group for each other.

It was not long before the time flew past and each of the regulars got up to leave for the evening bidding everyone remaining a good night. My father and I stayed until we were the only customers left and only one waitress and the cook remainder. I found myself wanting to stay and ask so many more questions, to learn so much more about the people whose lives became so entangled and surrounded by this place. I entered the restaurant at the beginning of the night with little to no understanding of what one would do in this discourse community and left wanting so badly to be a small piece of it. I learned what this place actually means to my dad and his friends. It is more than just a small restaurant, it is a way of living and surviving for those who attend every day. It is not fancy or predictable, but rather very plain and necessary. I have learned after constructing this essay that the description “plain” does not necessarily mean simple as it is nearly impossible to cover everything of such an elaborate community in a seven-page paper. Swales’ characteristics of intercommunication, lexis, intertextual references, goals, and expertise are so delicately woven together by the relationships and time put forth into this community that I find myself wondering how I had ever missed such characteristics before. The Waffle House inevitably means more to some individuals than to others and is quite often misunderstood or prematurely judged, but, if given the chance, it can show someone like you or me exactly what is means to be a community, a group of friends, or even a family.