Research Article

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Touching taste: The classist intersections of materiality, textuality and tactility

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Abstract: Contemporary class formations increasingly exceed language and, therefore, defy the usual word-centric, text-based approaches of discourse studies. As Bourdieu famously observed, class-sustaining enactments of distinction and taste are often enacted outside language through banal “techniques of the body” such as people’s ways of walking or ways of eating. In this vein, my paper presents a social-semiotic analysis of the particular role menus play in materializing taste, both gustatory and social. However, rather than taking the obvious tack of addressing their linguistic content or typographic design, I focus on their haptic, experiential properties; for example, their shape, size, weight, density and other textural, tactile or material features. As a critical-empirical focus, my core evidence is an archive of Business Class menus from 18 international airlines; it is here that eating practices are explicitly framed as distinctive and superior. The significance of any text cannot be properly understood by simply attending to its straightforwardly representational meanings; its sensory and sensuous materialities must be addressed too. This, I propose, is where some of the most subtle but powerful status-making happens – the seemingly harmless, throw-away moments where privilege/inequality arises, invariably obscured but assuredly naturalized.

Keywords: materiality, haptics, texture, touch, distinction, class privilege/inequality, airline menus

The schemes of the habitus ... owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny ... they embed what some would mistakenly call values in the most automatic gestures or the apparently most insignificant techniques of the body ... (Bourdieu 1984: 466)

Based on a long-standing, collaborative programme of research on elite discourse, I have come to recognize how the contemporary production of privilege – and thus the wider formations of inequality – increasingly exceeds language, and perhaps increasingly so (Thurlow 2016; Thurlow and Jaworski 2017a). As such, and like Bourdieu himself, I recognize that the workings of class defy the usual empirical focus and methods of sociocultural linguistics or discourse studies. In this vein, my paper here finds its critical-theoretical grounding in Bourdieu’s (1984: 466) famous observations about the class-sustaining role of *taste*, which he defines as “an acquired disposition to *differentiate* and *appreciate* and “to establish and mark differences by a process of distinction”. Importantly, Bourdieu notes how we remain largely unaware of these processes of distinction which are often enacted outside language through various banal “techniques of the body” such as ways of walking or ways of eating. A proper recognition of Bourdieu’s ideas inevitably nudges text- and word-focused scholars to pay closer attention to practices of embodiment, but it also demands an attention to materialities.

Following these foundational principles, and staying in the intensely classed field of eating, my paper presents a social-semiotic analysis of the particular role menus play in producing distinction and in materializing taste, both gustatory and social. My particular empirical-cum-critical focus is an archive of Business

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Class menus collected from 18 major international airlines.¹ Menus are, in Mondada's (2019: 118) terms, key "artefacts" in the orchestrated "material ecology" by which the meal and its social meanings are constituted. Menus are also good examples of the kinds of "frozen actions" which Norris (2004) has described: remnants or traces of prior discursive actions, such as magazines in medical waiting rooms or textbooks in classrooms. More broadly speaking, any meal served at 30,000 feet presents itself as a Foucauldian *assemblage* (see Deleuze 1992) or what Scollon (1998) would understand as a *nexus of practice*. My analysis might just have easily attended the place setting, the cutlery and crockery, the plating of the food, the serving of the food, the food itself, the eating of the food, the talking about the food, etc. (see Thurlow 2020, on the far-reaching, rippling context of a Business Class meal.) Regardless, the menu is surely an integral prelude to any performance of fine dining; it is also, as I will show in just a moment, often something remarkable or comment-worthy for passengers.² Besides, it is just the kind of recognizably "texty-text" (i.e. print documents) of the type many discourse analysts favour and which I would like to complicate. Language scholars like to look at the words on a page, but not the page itself.

Rather than taking the obvious tack of addressing the linguistic content (see Jurafsky 2014) or typographic design of menus, my focus is on their tangible, experiential properties; for example, their shape, size, weight, density and other material, textural or tactile features. Following Paterson (2009), tactility and touch are understood as more than simply tactile surfaces and cutaneous contact, but also as matters of fully embodied encounters with objects through bodily movement (kinesthetics) and the positioning of the body in space (proprioception). In the case of the menus, this wider perspective on touch directs attention to such matters as touch points, document handling, and the heft of the paper or card itself. In addressing the cultural politics of tactility (i.e. tangible touch), I am also informed by Sedgwick's (2003) approach to "touching-feeling" which understands *feeling* as something both haptic and affective. In other words, the goal is to consider how an object like the menu is sensed through bodily contact and experienced emotionally.

1 Introduction: Materiality, materialism and the euphoria of privilege

The aeroplane presents itself as a perfect site for studying contemporary class formations.³ With their intensive, often spectacular staging of status and distinction, international airlines have certainly been for me an opportunity to pin-point and unpack some of symbolic-material economies at the heart of contemporary life (see Thurlow 2016). Throughout, my methodological objective has been to explore ways of "materializing discourse": that is, to surface materiality as a semiotic resource, but to do so in ways which are rooted in a concern for political economy. In this regard, I follow the lead of Shankar and Cavanaugh (2012) who engage with materiality in two interconnected ways.

First, in the style of social semiotics, I want to examine how privilege is constituted through *materialities* – the deployment of banal and spectacular artefacts or things; this is the stuff of material culture (cf Thurlow 2015).⁴ An analytic focus on objects and things helps push the disciplinary boundaries of our engagement with

¹ The 18 airlines for which I had Business Class menus were: Emirates, Etihad, Qatar, Malaysia, Philippines, Thai, Cathay Pacific, Singapore, Turkish, SWISS, British Airways, Lufthansa, Air France, SAS, Icelandair, KLM, Qantas and United. In several cases, I also have First, Premium Economy or Economy menus for comparison. In the case of Qatar Airways and British Airways, I refer here to two iterations of their menus.

² In Business Class, the handing over of the menu to passengers can be quite ceremonial, often used by flight attendants as an initial point of contact but also as a resource for performing personalized service.

³ It remains to be seen how the international airline industry will emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time of writing, there is talk about the inevitable impact of the shutdown on many of the industry's fundamental commercial principles, including Business Class itself.

⁴ My intervention here could well be allied with the "turn to matter" associated with New Materialism (see Fox and Alldred 2019), but I reject the inherent turning away from texts precisely because, in both social and structural terms, they really do matter.

Figure 1: An elite pepper pot.

multimodal discourse and representational practice. Second, I am also keen to uphold a Marxist *materialism* by attending to the structural conditions under which production is ordered and by which consumption is motivated or justified (cf Thurlow 2020). Ultimately, the objective is to link materialities and materialism; this, argues Miller (2005), is really the whole the point of studying material culture: to understand the lived realities and concrete effects of power and inequality. As Miller explains, “The study of material culture often becomes an effective way to understand power, not as some abstraction, but as the mode by which certain forms or people become realized, often at the expense of others.” (ibid., p. 19). Materiality is thus not simply an empirical or methodological curiosity, but an explicitly political consideration.

Within the multifarious economies of international airline travel, I have therefore been focused on the often banal “stuff of status” which is regularly invoked and/or deployed for producing and staging distinction. A perfect case in point is to be found in Figure 1. Lifted from a previous Emirates flight from my own fieldwork, this pepper pot is a perfect example of the intersection of materialities and materialist critique. Here, as I have previously discussed in Thurlow (2015, 2016), we witness how the nature of privilege is both dreadfully material and deliciously immaterial. These frivolous objects speak volumes about the raw political economies of super-elite travel, most notably in the monetary and ecological cost of their fossil-fuel burn. But there are also other extractionary logics at work in the staging of so-called premium travel: not least, the increasing extraction of space, service and comfort from economy class to support the expansive, extravagance of business class. The little ceramic pepper pot is also a good parallel for the kinds of sensuous, “more-than-representational” materialities of the menus here which are a new analytic focus.

Although with a new empirical focus, the current paper emerges from a relatively long-standing commitment to investigating “elite discourse” and the linguistic/communicative production of contemporary class privilege and, thus, inequality (see, for example, Thurlow and Jaworski 2006, 2017b). Our studies of elite discourse point everywhere to the complex – and, indeed, often strategic – interplay of semiotic resources and, specifically, the obfuscating toggle between symbolic practices and iconic or material practices, between, for example, words and things, or ideas and stuff (Thurlow and Jaworski 2017a, on “word-things”). In a 2016 paper (Thurlow 2016), I then began to make sense of this transmodal and multisensory dynamic in terms of more-than-representational theory (Lorimer 2005), testing the possibility of a non-discursive discourse studies. In short, I have been arguing (a) that the power of status- and distinction-making practices lies often and precisely in the fact that they are not straightforwardly apprehensible and (b) that, in our determination to value only the empirical, we lose perspective on the profound but often obscured workings of privilege/inequality.

Seemingly banal objects – from pepper pots to menus – are powerful precisely because of their smallness, their mundanity and their relative disposability; in other words, their apparent innocuousness or harmlessness. They also work through a combination of their (apparently) tangible, tactile properties as well as their affective properties – the way they feel and, as such, the way they make us feel. All of which points also to what I have referred to as the *euphoria of privilege* (Thurlow 2016). This is a powerfully aspirational desire and pleasurable experience organized around what Lordon (2014) refers to as “humble joys”. In learning to enjoy

the little things in life – the ostensibly modest rewards for our efforts – members of the professional, managerial or bourgeois class consent to staying in line and to toeing the line. Undoubtedly structured by money, stuff and symbols, privilege thus comes to be organized also through aura, atmosphere and sentiment. In effect, and very much in the spirit of Bourdieu (1991) classist and/or elitist practices entail a layering of monetary, symbolic and affective economies. The nexus of these different economies is manifested perfectly in the feasting practices of Business Class. These are lavish semiotic-material assemblages (and theatrical performances) which sit at the heart of new-order elite mobilities.

The meal shown in Figure 2 is from Turkish Airlines which currently serves the world's best business class meal according to various ranking systems (see Thurlow 2020, for more background). This, we are therefore told, is the pinnacle of on-board dining. For now, however, I want to focus specifically on the no-less-sumptuous menu accompanying the meal, or at least one like it – see Figure 3a & b – which is a key constitutive resource (or theatrical prop) for staging and heralding the “premium” meal.

For passengers, the menu frames, or helps contextualize, the food and its eating; it literally helps entextualize the meal, but it also textures the experience of eating in other ways. In keeping with its much-touted cuisine, Turkish Airlines produces one of the most spectacular menus – so much so that it warrants special photographs from a passenger. This is a large, distinctively (uniquely, even) shaped menu: a fold-out menu on high-quality card. Note also the circular paperclip (no ordinary paper clip) which comes along with a menu for making your breakfast choices, space there for filling in your name and seat number before returning it to a flight attendant. (A dedicated, throw-away pen is provided.) There is undoubtedly more to this little “texty-text” than its words.

What is perhaps most significant about Figure 3a & b is that these are photos taken by an admiring passenger who has remediated them onto the web for others to see. For others to see him seeing – and being – in Business Class. There are in fact dozens and dozens of online reviews like this where invested passengers report out to other invested passengers – real or imagined, plausible or not – about the experience of airlines’ “premium”

Figure 2: “The best meal in Business Class”.

Figure 3: (a & b) Menu (front and inside) for “The best meal in Business Class”.

services: the seat, the entertainment system, the bedding and, of course, the meal. This often includes careful cinematic recordings of the menu too. One YouTube video titled “Turkish Airways (sic) – Flight TK034 – Aircraft 777-300ER – Seat 3A – Business Class” includes a 1 min segment in which the reviewer pans up and down the outside and inside of the menu.

The point is that, as part of the overall material and affective ecology of the meal, the menu does count. It is evidently appreciated enough to be recorded and broadcast. And this is a kind of appreciation which depends not only on personal enjoyment, but also a sense of discernment and a desire for social recognition. As such, the remediation of the menu is an inherently other-oriented performance – a bit of a brag, even. And a key explanation for what makes these particular menus so distinctive – and therefore feel so good – is precisely their haptic, experiential properties.

2 Analysis: Towards a social semiotics of tactile distinction

In what follows, I demonstrate with examples from my reasonably representative archive the most striking tactile and material features or properties of Business Class menus. These different features are collated into five analytic moves: (1) spatial effects, (2) textural effects, (3) touchpoint effects, (4) scalar effects and (5) combinatorial effects. It is in this way that I outline a social semiotics of tactile distinction – an analytic framework which, beyond the specific case of menus, may also be applicable to other status-making genres and discursive practices.

I start with the schematic overview in Table 1. Listed here are, first, a series of conventional analytic features and, second, the specifically tactile-material features which interest me most. Besides the more typical or to-be-expected analytic features, the tactile-material features are derived from my archive of menus as a grounded rather than necessarily comprehensive framework.

In a more conventional discourse-analytic approach to the menus, one would obviously expect attention to be paid to lexicalization and perhaps meta-lexicalization; these are the kinds of features that understandably fascinate Jurafsky (2014), including the fancified uses of, for example, French or Italian. (This is akin also to the well-known take on “oinoglossia” by Silverstein (2003). A more usual multimodal approach would then point to typography, images and other visual motifs, as well as colour and layout. These are reasonably well-documented modes which have increasingly become part of standard discourse analytic practice. Such is our tendency to focus on what is present or overt, however, that we are usually less practised at attending to the semiotic significance of active (or white) space, a key resource which typographers and graphic designers always attend to with great appreciation (see, for example, Hagen and Golombisky 2013). In my analysis, active space is taken as a point of departure in getting to grips with the tangible materialities of Business Class menus.

Another important starting point is the visualized surface textures of menus which, in turn, connect also with haptic (i.e. tangible) surface textures. For this, I necessarily orient to Djonov and van Leeuwen (2011) but also to the subsequent work of Aiello and Dickinson (2014), all of whom have sought already to make sense of the social semiotic potentials of texture, both visual and haptic. Of particular relevance here are relief, density and rigidity, which Djonov & van Leeuwen pin-point as defining qualities of surface textures. My

Table 1: Overview of analytic features.

Conventional features	Tactile-material features
– Lexicon	– Visual and tangible textural surfaces
– Typography	– Paper stock (e.g. caliper/thickness, density, weight)
– Images, motifs	– Card stock (e.g. coated; textured, metallic or glossy; quality)
– Colour (e.g. cover page, interior pages, typeface)	– Shape and size (e.g. the iconic Turkish menu or a restaurant-like menu)
– Layout (e.g. copy blocking or <u>active space</u>)	– Touchpoints (e.g. binding, loose sheets, technical complexity)
	– Implicit scalar dimensions (e.g. size, dimension)

analysis then turns to the technical world of paper and card, one which becomes highly significant (in both senses of the word) when it comes to the production of Business Class menus and, in turn, their performance of elite status. Bearing in mind the Turkish Airlines menu above, one is likewise obliged to consider the semiotic potentials of size and shape. Here, studies of commercial packaging by Jones (2014) and Ledin and Machin (2018) lend themselves well. As indicated in Table 1, it is partly through the experiential meanings and cultural conventions of size/shape that airline menus mimic the formalities and cachet of restaurant dining. Also made apparent in the Turkish Airlines menu, my analysis considers what I am labelling “touchpoints”: document design features with varying degrees of cognitive and/or physical demand in terms of their handling. Finally, Business Class menus undoubtedly rely on an implicit sense of comparative (or intertextual) size and dimension vis-à-vis the other, “lesser” menus of Economy Class. Having said which, this downward comparison meets its match in upward comparisons with First Class menus, something made clear in the following analysis. In this regard, I return to the formal start of my analysis with the first of the five brief but data-based analytic moves.

2.1 Spatial effects: Active space and filled “emptiness”

Not only are menus often quite large, but they achieve and perform their expansiveness also through the strategic use of active space, as opposed to the kind of passive space that might ordinarily open up between words, lines or pictures. The two examples used here are the menus for Etihad (Figure 4a & b) and SWISS (Figure 5a & b). This is deliberately “empty” or “silent” space which, technically speaking, is a waste of space or paper. The profit-making logic of all airlines requires weight-minimization for the sake of reduced fuel-burn; ordinarily, nothing goes on board without some consideration for these matters. This is why airlines remove things like inflight magazines and olives in times of fiscal hardship.⁵

The apparent emptiness of pages – the extravagant use of unfilled or unpopulated spaces – is actually a common resource for performing elite status (Thurlow and Jaworski 2010). Paradoxically, empty space is sometimes made to feel more spacious by filling it in ways that draw attention to its scale, but also to its being otherwise uncluttered. To this end, the complex patterns on the “empty” pages in Figures 4b & 5b confirm that the space was left deliberately blank without words or pictures. More evident from the close-up, and with no branding opportunity wasted, the pattern in Figure 5b comprises hundreds of tiny Swiss crosses. Furthermore, the fine-grained designs in these two instances also work to create an illusion of, which is to say the *look of*, textured fabric.

Figure 4: (a & b) Etihad menu—cover and inside cover/first page.

⁵ See “Airline weight reduction to save fuel: The crazy ways airlines save weight on planes”: <https://www.traveller.com.au/airline-weight-reduction-to-save-fuel-the-crazy-ways-airlines-save-weight-on-planes-h14vlh>.

Figure 5: (a & b) SWISS menu cover and close-up of inside cover.

2.2 Textural effects: Photographic surfaces and tangible qualities

Moving closer to tactility (i.e. tangible touch), we find everywhere the visual and/or photographic representation of surfaces. As Djonov and van Leeuwen (2011: 544) note, this is what visual artists might call “implied texture”. Surface textures – real or represented – have been become central to the stylizing of modern spaces, whether in Starbucks cafes or PowerPoint slideshows (Aiello and Dickinson 2014; Djonov and van Leeuwen 2011). A good example of this is shown in Figure 6, where the cover image displays fresh-looking citrus slices (in themselves textured – see lettuce in Figure 14) laid out on a well-lit, roughly-textured surface of what looks like slate. Slate, of course, is quite fashionable as a plate substitute in restaurants, which draws on a no-less-valuable proveniential meaning (cf Djonov and van Leeuwen 2011). But Business Class menus also move beyond mere visual representation by also using haptically-rendered tactile surfaces produced through, for example, elaborate card stock (Figures 6–8) or embossed motifs (Figure 8). In each of the three cases illustrated here, a different quality and style of card stock is used: glossy card, higher-caliper card and a more regular matt card. (I return to the haptic qualities of card/paper in a moment.)

As Jones (2014) observes, the meaning potentials of a text (or semiotic token) are always partially determined by indexical relationships between the text, its geographic emplacement or locational setting and indeed the situated practice of which it is a part. For this reason, some of the meaning potentials ascribed by Ledin and Machin (2018) to the textual qualities of food packaging do not quite hold for my Business Class menus. For example, textual rigidity is less likely to be a matter of a menu’s being unyielding or unaccommodating, but rather of its weight (as both heft and importance) and self-assurance. The use of relief in menus is likewise less a matter of naturalness and simplicity, more one of sumptuousness and/or simply being distinctive from ordinary paper or card. (Most people will recognize that high-quality or elaborated card stock

Figure 6: Singapore menu cover showing a visualized texture.

Figure 7: British menu cover showing a visualized and haptic texture.

is inherently a matter of price and therefore value.) Regularity, as another textural quality, also connotes differently in the contexts of super-elite space where the meaning potentials of predictability and manufacturedness are probably less salient than, say, orderliness and composure.

In using a plastified card stock with a surface relief, the British Airways menu (Figure 7) gives the look and partial feel of taffeta. In this sense, an experiential quality of cloth-ness generates provenancial meaning potentials such as fashion, good-quality fabrics and tradition. (Recall the provenance of the visualized slate just mentioned.) Notably, the design of the British Airways menu has recently changed (see Figure 18 below). Now shaped and sized more like the Etihad menu in Figure 8, the new iteration has switched out the taffeta effect for a linen effect, also adding blue with a slight metallic sheen. Gone from the cover itself is the verbal content (“Club World”), leaving only the logo; however, “Club World” and “Menu” now appear, via a materialized touchpoint effect, as if from the inside of the menu. In a moment I will address the combination of different design features, but I turn next to the matter of touchpoints.

2.3 Touchpoint effects: Technical intricacy and multiplicity

When it comes to touchpoints, the cost-benefit analyses must start to get quite challenging for airlines. This is also where design and functionality start to tussle. As I indicated with the Turkish Airlines menu (Figure 3a & b), there are other ways in which touch is engaged as a bodily, haptic action – and, again, in a way that pushes beyond mere skin contact. A touchpoint (or “contact moments”; cf Stein and Ramaseshan 2016) can be created as straightforwardly as binding a menu, turning it into a booklet or, in some cases, a small book. A good example of this is shown in Figure 9 where Cathay Pacific has a “cloth-look-alike” threading for binding

Figure 8: Etihad menu cover with embossing.

together its menu into a card-covered booklet. This undeniably has a different – perhaps more elaborate and thus more fancy – haptic quality than simply turning over a large, single-sheet cardboard menu.

A menu like the Turkish Airlines' one certainly demands not only some cognitive effort (certainly more than a single sheet of card might), but also bodily effort – a greater physical engagement. The menu is only fully realized through its “architectural” materiality. The same goes for the Thai Airways menu shown in Figure 10 which, from the cover, looks set to be a straight-forward, recognizable genre, but which turns out to be a lot more complicated inside – and a lot more demanding with its multiple interior sheets. However impractical, this kind of haptic tactic is no doubt intended to perform multiplicity and thereby to materialize selection and choice. And where there is choice, the appearance of a tailored experience may also be generated. Although, as psychologist Schwartz (2004) has noted, sometimes more choice may end up being less luxurious than first meets the eye; in fact, it may be a hindrance and an annoyance.

While touchpoints such as these often function quite explicitly, there are other ways in which tactile-material distinction is produced implicitly.

Figure 9: Cathay Pacific menu with “cloth” binding.

Figure 10: Thai menus (inside) with six loose sheets.

2.4 Scalar effects: Implicit size, shape/proportion, paper/card stock

Much like the packaging of food, shape is a visual-haptic signifier with a host of experiential and affective qualities. Following Ledin and Machin (2018), menus can distinguish themselves according to their vertical/horizontal orientation, their curvature or angularity (usually the second is preferred for “fitting” the received genre), size and weight. (Perhaps for practical reasons, opacity is less apparent in Business Class menus.)

In the production of material and tactile distinction, however, it is not only intrinsic properties but also extrinsic ones which warrant attention – design features which pointedly hinge on comparison (like all semiotic actions) for their significance. This consideration is akin to the intertextual qualities of food packaging, as discussed by Jones (2014). We see this at work most clearly in the same Etihad Business Class menu which, unbeknownst to many/most passengers, feels very different when set in comparison with the menus for Economy Class and First Class: see Figures 11–13. Here, the menus “scale up” also through the use of more and more active space. Certainly size matters, but so too does caliper (i.e. thickness), density and weight. In significant ways, these haptic qualities expand the repertoire of surface-textural qualities documented by Djonov and van Leeuwen (2011). People’s interactions with paper/card are structured by haptic sensations that are not only about touch as in cutaneous contact (see Paterson 2009), but which are experienced (as much) through the kinaesthetic and proprioceptive experiences of holding, picking up or turning over or leafing through something like a menu – or a magazine or book. Density (i.e. compactness of materials like threads) and rigidity have different properties here, and must necessarily be coupled also with an assessment of weight and thickness. In similar ways, it matters greatly if the card stock is not only textured but also coated, metallic or glossy, etc.

To be clear, all of these design choices – intrinsic or extrinsic – are motivated (i.e. both stimulated and constrained) by a raw economic concern for cost and profit. Evidently, airline marketers have determined that the monetary price is worth it for producing feelings of distinction and for a touch of status.

In summary, the material and tactile scaling of the Etihad menu runs something like this: Economy Class offers a single-sided off-white card; Business Class offers a long booklet menu in matt cream-coloured card, with a separate wine list (not shown) on a single-sided piece of thinner card, and then paper pages inside; First Class offers a wider booklet menu in stiffer card with a metallic sheen and a shiny gold-metallic logo and title, and metallic paper for the pages; there is also a separate booklet wine list (not shown) produced with similar card and paper stock. This summary points to the multiplication of design choices and, specifically, of haptic qualities, which brings me to the last of my five analytic moves.

2.5 Combinatorial effects: The moiré of touchy-feely resources

It is at this point that a social semiotics of tactile distinction really starts to come into view. To recap, this is an approach which extends conventional multimodal engagements by pushing further than lexicon, typography, images and even straightforward layout. Menus of any kind, like printed texts of any kind,

Figure 11: Etihad's Economy menu.

Figure 12: Etihad's Business Class menu.

Figure 13: Etihad's First Class menu.

demand that we not only read them or look at them, but that we touch them and feel them in a host of different ways. In the case of Business Class menus, it seems that the ways of *feeling* menus are multiple – and often so in even just a single menu. For this, I turn to two menus from Qantas in Figures 14 and 15: first, an A4 Business Class menu and then a shorter but wider First Class menu. Both are really quite large relative to most other menus in my archive.

Worth noting here is the painterly (i.e. still life) effect of the photos used on the covers of these two menus; this affords nicely the status-generating meaning potentials of high-culture and tradition. There is also the way in which a rich sense of photographic texture is produced through the surfaces depicted, as well as with the organic materiality of the vegetables – including the translucence of the lettuce leaves. (Recall the citrus slices in Figure 6). More than this, we find not only another implicit scaling effect but also clear evidence for the way multiple haptic-material effects are often combined. Specifically, the Business Class menu is a pamphlet using thick but not rigid paper stock, with no logo or brand mark and a white border. The First Class menu, meanwhile, is more square in its proportions, uses glossy but soft card in a booklet form, with an image on both the front and back covers, although with no white border on the front.

Many of the individual haptic-material tactics used do not in themselves or singularly produce the kind of elevated status required; this is instead usually achieved through combining three or more tactics. (This compare with the notion of the “composite” Djonov & van Leeuwen (2011:552) use for describing surface textures.) In other words, the design of the menus is itself an assemblage. In Jaworski's (2017) sense of the word, the effect is also one of a *moiré*: a suitably dynamic fabric metaphor for the shifting, shimmering layers of different semiotic resources in a text. As Jaworski explains with reference to landscapes, “Semiotic relations ... are moiré-like in their apparent or actual motion as the patterns created by the overlaying movements, sounds,

Figure 14: Qantas Business Class menu cover.

Figure 15: Qantas First Class menu cover.

texts, artefacts, spaces, bodies and so on fluctuate in a constant ebb and flow of interactional synchronicity and rupture ... ” (Jaworski 2017: 535). In the case of Business Class menus, tactility – as tangible touch – and materiality are embedded/invoked in multiple ways and across several moiréed layerings. And it is not certain which design feature or features a passenger may attend to in any moment.

I refer once again to the Qantas Business Class menu. In one layer (the technical/tactile dimension), we have the materiality of paper size and proportion. In another layer (the compositional/design dimension), we have the black/empty background and also the scalar effect of the isolated, magnified lettuce; note also how the white border frames the photography creating another sense of layered distinction. In yet another layer (the iconic dimension), the lighting means that we “see/feel” the texture of the lettuce – its crispness/firmness and its translucent details (all indexing freshness and naturalness). Finally, in another layer (an iconic-spatial dimension), we see the texture (slate?) surface upon which the lettuce sits, we also have perspectival depth and thus space.

In Peircean semiotic terms, these textual practices play endlessly with a mixing of “qualia” and “qualisigns” (see Chumley and Harkness 2013, for a neat account). In more social-semiotic terms, this entails, on the one hand, experiential qualities and meaning potentials derived through passenger’s immediate engagement with the menus, and then, on the other hand, provenantial associations and other more conventionalized meaning potentials. The difference lies in rubbing one’s fingers across a relief surface or feeling the heft of a hard-bound brochure, and then resting one’s eyes on some embossed golden lettering or on the iconic architectural or tulip-shaped edges of the Turkish Airlines menu.

3 Conclusion: Feeling distinction, touching taste

Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make ... (Bourdieu 1984: 6)

Airlines (their marketers or branding agents) appear to play endlessly with the distinction-producing affordances of menus, mixing and combining the numerous tactile-material resources and haptic experiences. It is certainly a lot cheaper for airlines to change the look and feel of their menus than to change the planes themselves. This seemingly innocuous, disposable text is therefore a relatively affordable chance for airlines to distinguish themselves and to make their passengers feel distinguished. As Jurafsy (2014) also observes, the culture of menus constantly changes too, with ever new styles and fads for performing cultural-social status (aka brand identity) and “fine-dining”. Airlines, too, must keep up if they are to stay abreast of the latest trends in good taste.

The Qatar Airways menu in Figure 16 was the one which first got me thinking about the textual-haptic properties and cultural politics of Business Class menus. As something of a novelty for me, I was struck immediately that this was meant to be no ordinary on-board menu. The booklet’s size, card stock, fabric-like relief surface, staple-binding, silver lettering on the cover (English on one side, Arabic on the other) seemed a little excessive since the actual menu inside was just the two leaves (high-density paper stock): food on one side, beverages on the other – first in English, then Arabic (or *vice-versa*). In addition to the new British Airways menu in Figure 18 (analysis above), I also have the latest iteration of Qatar Airways’ menu (Figure 17) where the aesthetic, haptic balancing act has been reconfigured into a smaller, darker booklet with the same embossed motif but an enlarged pattern. The menu’s shape and size are now more decidedly vertical. The lettering is smaller (at the bottom) but now in a yellow-pink gold. Slightly lower-grade card stock is used for the cover, but with a sheen to the embossing and a contrasting purple-brown colour on the inside covers. The sheets inside use a lower-caliper paper but with a slight plastification and a very subtle surface relief. The menu, as it happens, also appears in a third language: Chinese. These are all such small, almost imperceptible and seemingly inconsequential choices, but each is a deliberate choice and, in combination, a very pointed choice.

The Sisyphean challenge of status – elite or otherwise – is that no sooner has someone feels they have “arrived” when the status markers are changed. Something more distinctive, more superior inevitably comes along. This, as Bourdieu (quote above) notes, is the social game being played: a never-ending cycle of classifying taste and of being classified; this is the pursuit of distinction in order to distinguish oneself. It is why airlines, like all corporations, are constantly reinventing themselves through their status-making tactics, keeping passengers always aspirational (Thurlow and Jaworski 2006, 2017a). It is here, I believe, that some essential truths about the nature of distinction and taste are to be found. It is also precisely how “premium” menus work their subtle social magic through the effective interplay of materiality, textuality and tactility.

Figure 16: Old Qatar menu.

Figure 17: New Qatar menu.

Figure 18: New British menu.

Menus or any other texts cannot be properly understood by simply attending to their linguistic, representational or symbolic meanings. If we are to fully understand the material consequences of discursive practices – in materialist (aka political) terms – then we need to address their sensory and, indeed, sensuous *materiality*. Herein lies some of the most subtle but powerful status-making. We certainly cannot make sense of menus – or any print genre – by looking only at the words on the page. Nor is it enough to look only at typography or layout or images or colour, and so on. A more holistic, material(istic) approach requires that we consider what takes place beside two-dimensional “on-the-page” representations. To some extent, this requires that we engage with *textuality* in more literal or proper ways.

The moment of lifting a menu from the table (or tray), feeling it within one’s hands, entails an embodied engagement with something tangible – something with size, texture, heft and perhaps even smell.⁶ Perhaps, and following the lead of Ingold (2010: 91), discourse analysts need to reclaim the notion of *texts* as first and foremost material accomplishments – as “fields of force and flows of material”. The process of entextualization should thereby never be treated as an exclusively verbal or even neatly representational action; it invariably also entails the crafting of something – a thing – of substance. The etymological origins of “text” are thereby resurfaced as something woven, fabricated and manufactured, bringing the material and materialist ramifications of texts more forcefully to the fore. In recognizing this, perhaps we also come closer to the real power and authority of entextualization (cf Park and Bucholtz 2009: 486.).

Finally, there is *tactility*: the material but also sometimes immaterial properties of touch and the wider haptics of people’s experiences of print texts. Here, my concern has been with both the physical, sensory

⁶ I do not, for example, consider the smell of menus in the way that, for example, people can have an olfactory response to new and especially old books: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/07/the-smell-of-old-books-science-libraries>.

qualities of texts (their qualia or experiential meanings) as well as with their sensuous, affective resonances. For some discourse analysts, this might be a step too far – a non-empirical, more-than-representational direction in which they are not willing to head. Notwithstanding, the tactile-material qualities of Business Class menus – their tangible feel – are clearly central to their meaning. If nothing else, a lot of thought and money goes into their design. Menus are meant to matter. And, like Sedgwick (2003), touch is unavoidably also that other kind of feeling: that feel-good feeling and that “feeling good about myself” feeling. These are precisely the kinds of feelings that generate “humble joys” and that feed the euphoria of privilege with which I started (cf Lordon 2014; Thurlow 2016). In either case, the point is not to deny language but to *provincialize* it. Not to necessarily go beyond representational practices but to recognize and address what sits beside/s them. And we do this precisely because, as Bourdieu notes, these unconscious, apparently insignificant ways of knowing and doing are not only efficacious, they are also surprisingly powerful.

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