

Personae Through Sensory Evaluation in Taiwanese Coffee Discourse

Richard Huang

National Taiwan Normal University

richard.ziyue.h@gmail.com

Introduction

Coffee has emerged as a significant site for identity construction in contemporary consumer culture. Research in semiotic anthropology has examined how beverages serve as media for enacting social personae, oinoglossia (Silverstein, 2003) and brutoglossia (Konnolly, 2020) represent landmark studies demonstrating how wine and craft beer discourse, respectively, constitute structured registers that index social distinctions. This study argues that coffee presents a distinct case: unlike wine or beer, coffee is routinely prepared through domestic, hands-on practice, making the barista persona a contested site whose authorization must be discursively negotiated rather than institutionally assumed. Despite the rapid growth of Taiwan's specialty coffee culture, no focused sociolinguistic investigation has examined how the barista persona is enregistered through evaluative discourse in this context. The present study addresses this gap by asking: what linguistic features are enregistered as *barista talk* in Taiwanese Mandarin, and how do these features index different social personae?

Theoretical Framework

The analysis integrates three complementary frameworks. Silverstein's (2003) concept of indexicality provides the foundation for understanding how localized linguistic forms carry broader social meanings. Agha's (2005, 2024) theory of enregisterment explains how clusters of linguistic features become socially recognizable as belonging to a coherent characterological figure—in this case, the expert barista. To account for the instability of these indexical meanings, the study draws on Eckert's (2008) notion of the indexical field, which positions linguistic forms as pointing to a range of potential social values. Interactional dynamics are analyzed through Du Bois's (2007) stance triangle, which captures how speakers simultaneously evaluate objects, position themselves epistemically, and align with or against others.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, comparative corpus design. Data were collected from YouTube, a platform affording comparison between specialized professional content and generalist evaluative discourse. A pilot corpus of six ten-minute videos was assembled: four from dedicated coffee channels and two from generalist lifestyle creators. All videos center on the explicit evaluation of coffee, enabling controlled comparison of how distinct social identities approach the same communicative task. Following transcription and inductive coding, a third emergent category—the *Enthusiast*—was identified, representing speakers who deploy sensory vocabulary but adopt epistemic stances distinct from professional baristas.

Analysis and Findings

Across three sensory domains—taste, aroma, and mouthfeel—systematic differences in lexical, grammatical, and metaphorical strategies reflect distinct epistemologies of sensory experience.

Baristas frame sensory qualities as analyzable and replicable through nominalized compounds (*suāndù* ‘acidity’), temporal segmentation (*wěiyùn* ‘finish/aftertaste’), and institutionalized metaphor repertoires drawn from the coffee flavor wheel (*mùzhí diàoxìng* ‘woody notes’). These choices construct sensory experience as a structured object of expert scrutiny, indexing a professional persona grounded in precision and analytic control.

Enthusiasts occupy a liminal position, characterized by comparative constructions (*bǐjiào kǔ* ‘more bitter’), hedging devices, and food metaphors (*hēiqiǎokèlì* ‘dark chocolate’) that invoke an implicit but unarticulated evaluative benchmark—what this study terms a “ghost standard.” This discourse indexes sufficient familiarity to move beyond generic descriptors while resisting categorical commitment to expert criteria.

Laypeople employ holistic and negation-based evaluations (*hěn kǔ* ‘very bitter’; *méiyǒu shuǐguǒ de xiāngqì* ‘no fruity aroma’) that orient to sensory experience as practically immediate rather than analytically decomposable. Semi-technical terms circulating through commercial media (*huígān* ‘sweet aftertaste’) also appear in lay discourse, but are stripped of indexical ties to professional expertise through mass-cultural diffusion.

Discussion and Conclusion

These findings demonstrate that sensory evaluation in coffee discourse is a linguistically mediated practice through which speakers enact epistemic stance and construct social personae. The barista persona in Taiwan is enregistered through precision-oriented, analytically structured language that presupposes socialization into a specialized evaluative community. Crucially, learning to “taste like a barista” is inseparable from learning to *talk* like one—perceptual authority is interactionally produced through patterned linguistic practice rather than given by sensory acuity alone. Lay resistance to such registers should not be interpreted as perceptual deficiency, but as orientation to a different evaluative economy. This study contributes to research on language, expertise, and enregisterment by showing how sensory domains serve as rich sites for examining the social organization of knowledge.

References

- Agha, A. (2005). Voice, footing, enregisterment. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 15(1), 38–59.
- Agha, A. (2024). *Enregisterment*. Cambridge University Press.
- Du Bois, J. W. (2007). The stance triangle. In R. Englebretson (Ed.), *Stancetaking in discourse* (pp. 139–182). John Benjamins.
- Eckert, P. (2008). Variation and the indexical field. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 12(4), 453–476.
- Konnolly, L. (2020). Brutoglossia: Craft beer, language, and the social meaning of “local.” *Language in Society*, 49(1), 69–93.
- Silverstein, M. (2003). Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life. *Language & Communication*, 23(3–4), 193–229.