

EDUCACIÓN, HUMANIDADES Y SOCIEDAD EN TRANSFORMACIÓN

Miradas interdisciplinarias



Fabrizio Manuel Sirignano
Nadia Carlomagno
Miquel Gonzàlvez Blasco

(Eds.)

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Capítulo 19. Registerial Features of Nineteenth-Century Cooking Recipes: A Corpus-Based Study

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Abstract: This chapter examines the language of nineteenth-century English cooking recipes from a corpus-based systemic functional perspective. Drawing on COWITE19 (Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts, 1800–1899), it analyses recipes authored by women in order to describe their registerial profile and to explain how recurrent grammatical patterns reflect the social context of domestic cookery. Register is approached as a principled alignment between linguistic choices and the contextual variables of field, tenor and mode. Taking the clause as the basic unit of analysis, the study focuses on transitivity, mood and modality, and thematic organisation. Quantitative frequency data are combined with qualitative concordance analysis. The findings show a strong predominance of material processes and imperative clauses, supported by relational clauses that signal results and by a limited set of modal resources that calibrate obligation and advice. These patterns collectively encode domestic expertise and position the writer as an authoritative but cooperative guide, illustrating the explanatory power of register analysis for historical instructional discourse.

Keywords: systemic functional linguistics, corpus linguistics, recipes, discourse analysis, register

1. INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth century witnessed profound transformations in the Anglo-American domestic sphere. Industrialisation, urbanisation and the expansion of print culture reshaped patterns of food production, consumption and household management, while rising literacy rates among middle-class women generated a growing demand for written domestic guidance. Within this context, cookery books and household manuals emerged as one of the most visible and influential genres addressed to women and increasingly authored by them.

Previous scholarship in food history and cultural studies has explored the social meanings of recipes, their links with class, gender and domestic ideology, and their role in the professionalisation of housekeeping. However, comparatively little attention has been paid to the language of recipes itself as a patterned system that connects recurring grammatical choices with the social functions these texts fulfil. As a result, the registerial profile of nineteenth-century cooking recipes (the linguistic resources they privilege and the meanings these resources enact) remains underexplored.

This chapter addresses this gap through a systemic functional analysis of a specialised corpus of nineteenth-century English cooking recipes written by women. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) offers a particularly suitable framework because it

conceptualises language as a social semiotic resource shaped by context. From this perspective, recipes are not merely instructional texts but semiotic solutions to recurrent communicative problems: how to encode practical knowledge in a portable form, how to organise action into reproducible sequences, and how to position the writer and reader within a relationship of expert guidance.

The analysis draws on COWITE19 (Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts, 1800–1899), focusing on cooking recipes as a synchronic representation of nineteenth-century practice. Although the corpus spans different decades and regions, the present study concentrates on the shared registerial regularities that characterise women's recipe writing within comparable material and institutional conditions, namely the middle-class kitchen and the printed household manual.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This chapter investigates the linguistic organisation of nineteenth-century English cooking recipes written by women, as represented in COWITE19 (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2023), from an SFL perspective. The overarching aim is to describe the registerial profile of this genre by identifying typical grammatical patterns and relating them to communicative purposes and social relations.

RQ1 addresses experiential meaning: What patterns of transitivity characterise women's cooking recipes, and how do these patterns construe domestic cookery as a sequence of actions, states and results? The objective is to establish how operations, ingredients and outcomes are grammatically encoded.

RQ2 focuses on interpersonal meaning: How do mood and modality construct the tenor between women writers and their readers in terms of authority and guidance? This involves examining imperatives, declaratives and modal expressions as indicators of social dynamics.

RQ3 addresses textual meaning: How do thematic organisation and cohesion structure the procedural mode of nineteenth-century recipes? The aim is to identify typical Themes and cohesive devices supporting step-by-step instruction.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as its main theoretical framework. SFL views language not as a set of autonomous rules but as a social semiotic resource for making meaning, organised as networks of choices that speakers and writers draw on in specific contexts (Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). From this perspective, grammatical patterns are motivated by the social purposes that texts serve. Recipes, as a highly conventionalised form of instructional writing, are therefore expected to display a tightly patterned relationship between linguistic form and contextual function.

At the core of SFL lies the concept of metafunction. Halliday (1985) argues that every clause simultaneously realises three strands of meaning: ideational, interpersonal and textual. The ideational metafunction construes experience, allowing language users to represent actions, events, states and relationships in the world. The interpersonal metafunction enacts social relations, positioning interactants in terms of power, solidarity and attitude. The textual metafunction organises the flow of information into coherent messages. These metafunctions are not separate layers but concurrent dimensions of meaning, and each is associated with particular grammatical systems. For the purposes of

this chapter, three systems are central: transitivity (ideational), mood and modality (interpersonal), and theme and cohesion (textual).

Transitivity, in SFL, is a semantic system that classifies processes and their participants (Halliday, 1985). It distinguishes, among others, material, mental, relational, verbal and behavioural processes, each with its own typical set of participant roles. Material processes encode actions and events in the physical world (e.g. “boil the milk”, “cut the meat”), with participants such as Actor, Goal, Recipient and Beneficiary. Mental processes represent perception, cognition and emotion (“taste the sauce”, “consider the cost”), typically involving a Senser and a Phenomenon. Relational clauses establish attributions and identifications (“the mixture is thick”; “this is the stock”), while verbal processes (“say”, “advise”, “recommend”) project messages and behaviour. Behavioural and existential processes occupy intermediate areas between these major types.

In instructional discourse such as cooking recipes, material clauses are expected to dominate because the field of activity is defined by concrete actions carried out on ingredients and utensils (Biber & Conrad, 2009). However, other process types play important complementary roles. Relational clauses specify desired states and outcomes (“the pudding is done when...”), mental clauses often appear in the form of sensory tests (“see if it thickens”; “taste and adjust seasoning”), and verbal clauses may surface in framing sections that introduce authorities, sources or endorsements. Examining the balance and distribution of these process types across the corpus allows us to characterise the grammar of experience for nineteenth-century domestic cookery.

The interpersonal metafunction is realised primarily through the MOOD system and associated resources of modality. In SFL, MOOD structure is encoded by the configuration of Subject and Finite within the clause and underpins the distinction between declaratives, interrogatives and imperatives (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). These options in turn correspond to basic speech functions: statements, questions, offers and commands. Recipes are prototypically command-oriented texts, with a strong preference for imperative mood. However, previous work on instructive genres has shown that imperatives are often combined with declaratives and modality to soften or calibrate the force of directives (Martin & Rose, 2007; Moss, 2010).

Modality refers to the resources speakers use to express degrees of probability, usuality, obligation and inclination (Halliday, 1985). It can be realised through modal verbs (“must”, “should”, “may”), semi-modals (“have to”, “need to”), modal adverbs (“probably”, “carefully”), adjectives (“necessary”, “possible”) and nominalisations (“obligation”, “possibility”). In recipes, modality frequently bears a deontic meaning (expressing what the reader must or should do to ensure success) or a low-key advisory stance that mitigates imposition (“you may add more sugar if desired”). Analysing the distribution and function of modal resources in COWITE19 thus provides insight into the tenor of the relationship between the female writer and her imagined reader, who is often positioned as an inexperienced or less experienced cook.

The textual metafunction is concerned with how clauses are organised into messages and how texts achieve coherence over stretches of discourse. Two sets of resources are especially relevant here: theme–rheme structure and cohesion. In SFL, the Theme is the point of departure of the clause, typically realised by the initial position in English, while the Rheme provides new information in relation to that point (Eggins, 2004). By choosing particular elements as Theme (participants, processes, or circumstances) writers foreground certain aspects of the message and create recognisable patterns of progression.

Procedural texts often employ circumstantial Themes to anchor steps in time or condition (“When cool, add the eggs”; “After boiling, strain through a cloth”), thereby mapping the sequence of actions onto the temporal unfolding of the task (Gotti, 2011). They may also rely on textual Themes such as “then”, “next”, “afterwards”, “finally” to signal progression explicitly. Investigating thematic preferences in nineteenth-century recipes can reveal how the mode of discourse supports the reader’s ability to follow instructions, especially in a context where visual layout is less standardised than in modern cookbooks.

Cohesion operates across clause boundaries through devices such as reference, conjunction, lexical repetition and collocation (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). In recipes, simple conjunctions (“then”, “next”, “until”, “before”, “after”) and reiteration of key lexical items play a central role in maintaining continuity between ingredients and operations. Patterns of co-reference, such as the use of pronouns (“it”, “them”) to refer back to mixtures or utensils, also contribute to textual economy and presuppose shared understanding between writer and reader.

SFL explicitly ties these metafunctional resources to the contextual concept of register. Register is defined as a configuration of meanings that is typically associated with a particular situational context, encoded through language choices across the metafunctions (Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Martin, 1992). It is characterised in terms of three variables: field (what is happening, the nature of the social action), tenor (who is taking part, with what relations) and mode (the role language plays in the situation). The present study treats nineteenth-century women’s cooking recipes as a relatively stable register whose field is domestic food preparation, whose tenor is an asymmetrical but cooperative relationship between an expert female writer and a less experienced reader, and whose mode is written, monologic, and highly procedural.

Register analysis thus offers an explanatory model that seeks to show how particular configurations of transitivity, mood and theme are motivated by the situational variables that define the genre. For example, the dominance of material processes and imperative clauses can be interpreted as a reflection of the field’s orientation towards action and the tenor’s requirement for directive force; the heavy use of circumstantial Themes and simple connectors can be viewed as a consequence of the need for linear, step-by-step organisation in the mode. By combining corpus methods with SFL, we can empirically demonstrate the patterned co-occurrence of these features and relate them systematically to contextual constraints.

4. METHOD

4.1. Approach

The analysis adopts a corpus-based systemic functional approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Although the texts span most of the nineteenth century, they are treated as a synchronic register of women’s instructional writing in cookery. Quantitative patterns are used to identify salient linguistic tendencies, which are then interpreted through close qualitative analysis of concordance lines and complete recipes.

4.2. Tools

All corpus queries were carried out with #LancsBox X (Brezina & Platt, 2025). First, the Words tool was used to generate overall frequency lists for the COWITE19 and to

calculate relative frequencies (per 10,000 words) for key lexical and grammatical items. This module also provided dispersion information across individual files, which was used to check that frequent items were not confined to one or two individual authors.

Second, the GraphColl module supported the identification of collocations and local phraseology associated with core cooking verbs such as “take”, “put”, “boil”, “bake”, “mix” and “serve”. Collocational profiles were generated using logDice as association measure, to minimise differences in text sizes. These profiles helped to uncover recurrent lexical–grammatical patterns such as “boil [...] till,” “bake [...] in a quick oven,” or “mix well together,” which were then interpreted in terms of transitivity, mood and theme.

Third, the KWIC (Key Word in Context) concordancer allowed for detailed qualitative inspection. For each search item, KWIC displays all occurrences in a centred format with editable sorting options. This made it possible to observe, for example, the range of structures in which imperatives appeared, the contexts where modal verbs were used, or the types of circumstantial Themes that introduced clauses. Exported tables from these tools were then annotated manually for SFL categories where required.

4.3. Corpus

The data come from the COWITE19 (Corpus of Women’s Instructive Texts, 1800–1899) (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2023). For this study, a specialised subcorpus of twenty-four recipe books written by women in Britain and the United States between 1806 and 1886 was compiled. The texts were originally digitised from historical editions and converted into plain-text format, with paratextual material removed where this was clearly distinguishable from the main instructional content.

The resulting subcorpus contains approximately 386,000 running words. Each text is associated with basic metadata: author and year of publication. These variables are used to check for gross imbalances and to contextualise examples, but the analysis treats the collection as a single register of nineteenth-century women’s cooking recipes.

The books vary in length, scope and degree of professionalisation, ranging from modest domestic manuals to more ambitious compendia resembling early household encyclopaedias. Despite this variety, they share core generic features: they are written in English, addressed primarily to female readers, organised as sequences of recipes with brief headings, and explicitly designed to instruct in matters of cookery and household management. This common communicative purpose justifies treating them as a coherent register for the present purposes.

4.4. Procedure

The analysis followed several consecutive steps, from preparing the data to doing the quantitative overview and, finally, the qualitative interpretation. In the first stage, all deputed text files were imported into #LancsBox X as a single corpus, keeping each volume as an independent file labelled with its metadata. A preliminary frequency list was generated to ensure that the corpus behaved as expected; this check confirmed the high frequency of function words and of core culinary items such as butter, sugar, flour, oven and pan, which indicates that the material is appropriate for the intended analysis.

In the second step, a quantitative overview of the registerial features was produced. Using the Words module, frequency lists were examined to identify the most common lexical

verbs, temporal and instrumental nouns, and simple connectors. Normalised frequencies were calculated per 10,000 words so that texts of different length could be compared in a principled way. On the basis of these counts, core cooking verbs such as take, put, boil, bake, mix, fry and serve were selected as focal points, since they clearly reflect the material processes that dominate the field of activity. The same step provided counts and dispersion measures for items signalling time and device, such as minutes, hour, oven and pan, which are crucial for modelling the grammar of control characteristic of the genre.

The third part of the process involved collocational and concordance analysis of these focal items. For each verb, GraphColl was used to generate collocation networks with logDice as association measure, within a symmetrical span of four words. This made it possible to observe which elements habitually cluster around each process, for instance that boil tends to co-occur with minutes, hours, then and strain, or that bake frequently appears together with oven, pan, moderate, quick and brown. These collocational patterns were interpreted as indicators of typical participant roles and circumstances. KWIC was then employed to examine representative concordance lines for each verb and for other items of interest. Manual annotation focused on identifying the process type realised by the verb, the presence of imperative or declarative mood, the occurrence of modal auxiliaries, and the nature of clause-initial Themes.

In the final stage, a smaller sample of complete recipes from different authors and decades was selected for detailed functional analysis. Each recipe was segmented into clauses and coded for process type, mood choice and thematic structure. Particular attention was paid to stretches where material imperatives with initial temporal or manner Themes, simple conjunctive ties and recurrent nominal groups combined to form highly controlled procedural sequences. These close readings served both to illustrate the quantitative trends and to refine interpretations where necessary, for example by revealing how rare mental processes tend to occur in cautionary or evaluative moves rather than in core procedural steps.

5. RESULTS

The results are organised around four dimensions that correspond to the systems examined in the study: the global lexical profile, transitivity, mood and modality, and thematic and cohesive organisation. At the most general level, the corpus comprises 385,965 tokens and 8,733 types. The overall frequency profile, summarised in Table 1, confirms the high lexical concentration around a limited set of procedural verbs, ingredients, implements and temporal markers. Verbs such as “take”, “put”, “boil”, “bake”, “fry”, “mix”, “stir”, “pour”, “add” and “serve” recur throughout the corpus and dominate the verbal inventory of the texts. Likewise, core culinary nouns such as “butter”, “sugar”, “flour”, “milk”, “eggs”, “pan”, “pot” and “oven” appear with high and relatively stable frequencies across authors and decades, while temporal and sequencing items (“then”, “next”, “afterwards”, “until”, “till”, “when”, “before”, “after”) also occur prominently. This combination of frequent process verbs, kitchen implements and temporal markers, numerically detailed in Table 1, indicates that the recipes strongly privilege concrete action, material resources and fine-grained temporal control, in line with the procedural nature of the genre.

Table 1. Core material process verbs in COWITE19

Verb	Raw frequency	Rel. freq. (per million)	Concordance example
put	1,040	2,694.7	"...would, of their own accord, put away the paper and twine..."
take	673	1,743.9	"...hard and bunched, rip them, take the hair out, pull it..."
boil	602	1,560.0	"...is a prodigious improvement to boil and skim it before you..."
add	512	1,327.2	"...to clarify it; strain it; add one quarter of an oz..."
bake	243	629.4	"...other pieces of pork to bake with beans. The head is..."
mix	222	575.2	"...cored, sliced, and fried, to mix with it, is an improvement..."
stir	213	552.0	"...it with a little sugar, stir it well, and, when cold..."
pour	201	520.6	"...three or four days; then pour a gallon of water in..."

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The transitivity analysis confirms that material clauses overwhelmingly predominate. The most frequent processes involve physical manipulation ("take", "put", "cut", "stir", "mix", "pour"), application of heat ("boil", "bake", "fry", "stew") and operations of combining or separating ("mix", "strain", "skim", "clear"). These material clauses typically construe the cook as Actor and the ingredient as Affected, for example "put the sugar into a saucepan", "stir the flour well", "boil the milk gently". Relational clauses are also recurrent, especially in clause-final positions that signal states and results, such as "the sauce is thick", "the pudding is done", "it is quite Brown". These clauses function as evaluative checkpoints in the sequence, marking when a process has reached the desired outcome. Mental processes are comparatively infrequent and tend to appear in specific functions such as sensory testing ("taste if it be seasoned enough", "see if it rise well") or in advisory comments ("take care not to let it burn"). Verbal and existential clauses occur only marginally, mainly in citations of authorities.

The mood analysis reveals a clear predominance of imperative clauses, which form the backbone of the instructional discourse. Core steps are routinely encoded as bare imperatives ("take", "put", "stir", "mix", "boil", "serve"), which position the writer as provider of instructions and the reader as compliant follower of a sequence. Declarative clauses appear less frequently and perform more specialised functions: they explain rationales ("this will prevent it from curdling"), describe states ("the jelly is now firm"), or summarise results ("it will make a very rich soup"). Interrogative clauses are virtually absent, as expected in monologic procedural writing. Table 2 gathers the quantitative distribution of mood types and the main modal and quasi-modal resources.

Within this imperative-dominated configuration, one striking interpersonal pattern is the frequent use of the construction let + it + V, which functions as a mitigated directive and is also captured in Table 3. Typical examples include "let it boil for ten minutes", "let it stand till cold", "let it cool completely before serving", or "let it fry till of a light brown colour". Grammatically, these clauses retain the imperative mood but distribute the directive force between the operator "let" and the pronoun "it", which refers to the current

preparation. This pattern has several functional effects. First, it softens the command by construing the process as something that is allowed or enabled rather than directly commanded, thereby reducing the perceived imposition on the reader. Second, it shifts attention away from the human Actor and onto the evolving substance: the focus is not on what “you” must do, but on what “it” should be allowed to do over time. Third, let + it + V aligns naturally with temporal and conditional Circumstances, as in “let it boil until it is quite clear” or “let it stand for an hour before you cut it”, which reinforces its role in managing stages and thresholds in the process.

Table 2. Directive and modal resources: imperatives, *let it*-pattern and modal verbs

Resource	Function in tenor	Raw freq.	Rel. freq. (per million)	Example
<i>let it</i> + V	mitigated imperative, shared agency	926	2399.7	“...strain it into a clean vessel, and let it stand till cold...”
must	strong obligation / necessity	939	2432.9	“The soup must be perfectly clear before serving.”
may	permission / weak possibility	6	15.5	“If too thick, it may be thinned with a little milk.”
can	ability / procedural possibility	319	826.2	“It can be kept for several days in a cool place.”
might	tentative recommendation	524	1357.2	“A little lemon juice might be added, if approved.”
will	predictive / directive future	1523	3947.7	“This quantity will be enough for six persons.”
would	conditional / hedged directive	92	238.3	“I would advise using fresh butter for this dish.”
should	normative advice	19	49.2	“The pan should be well heated before the batter is put in.”
could	hypothetical option	5	13.0	“A glass of wine could be added for flavour.”

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

Modality is expressed primarily through modal verbs such as “must”, “should”, “may”, “can”, “could”, “will” and “would”, together with semi-modals (“have to”, “ought to”) and evaluative adverbs, all quantified in Table 3. Strong obligation is encoded with “must” in warnings and hygiene-related clauses (“the pan must be very clean”, “you must take care that it does not scorch”), where the consequences of error are potentially serious. “Should” is used to formulate recommended practices with slightly less force (“the oven should be moderate”, “the soup should be clear”), often in connection with quality standards rather than safety. Possibility and permission appear through “may” and “can”, usually to present variants or concessions (“you may use dripping instead of butter”, “it can be served either hot or cold”). In many cases, modality interacts with the let + it + V construction, which implicitly encodes a weaker type of obligation or allowance, as in “let it simmer gently”, where intensity and duration are modulated without an explicit modal auxiliary. This layered pattern of bare imperatives, mitigated let-imperatives, and modalised recommendations constructs a tenor that is at once authoritative and cooperative: the writer knows more, but she guides, cautions and sometimes negotiates alternatives rather than issuing uniformly categorical orders.

Thematic and cohesive patterns support this interpersonal configuration by signalling a highly sequential mode of discourse. At clause level, circumstantial Themes are frequent, especially temporal ones (“when cold”, “when done”, “before serving”, “after it has boiled”, “in Winter”), which anchor each step in a relative position within the overall process; their most frequent forms are also included in Table 1 alongside other high-frequency textual organisers. These initial Circumstances often co-occur with *let + it + V* clauses, for example “when it boils, let it simmer gently”, producing compact patterns that articulate both timing and interpersonal stance. Non-finite Themes such as “to clarify the butter” or “to make a richer sauce” introduce purpose-oriented sub-procedures that fold chunks of meaning into initial position and make explicit the goal of the following steps. Cohesion at textual level relies heavily on simple conjunctions and continuative items (“then”, “next”, “afterwards”, “lastly”, “until”, “till”), whose frequencies are again summarised in Table 1 and which mark progression and closure throughout the procedural sequences.

6. DISCUSSION

This discussion is framed within the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) model of register, understood as the configuration of field, tenor and mode that links linguistic choices to social context (Egins, 2004; Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Taken together, the lexical, transitivity, mood–modality and thematic patterns show that nineteenth-century recipes in COWITE19 constitute a highly conventionalised register that is at once strongly procedural and socially asymmetrical, yet rhetorically careful in how it guides the reader.

From an SFL perspective, the field concerns the nature of the social activity enacted and is primarily realised through choices in the Transitivity system (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The global frequency profile in Table 1 confirms that the discourse is saturated with material processes. The overwhelming prominence of core process verbs such as “put”, “take”, “boil”, “add” and “mix”, all above 500 tokens and with very high relative frequencies, indicates that the texts are organised around physical operations. Within SFL, such material processes constitute the primary grammatical resource for construing actions and events in texts oriented towards practical activity (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). These verbs do not merely name actions; they divide the cooking event into minimal executable steps and thereby encode a shared repertoire of domestic practice. The accompanying nouns (“butter”, “sugar”, “flour”, “milk”, “eggs”, “pan”, “pot”, “oven” anchor this activity in a material environment that is both recognisable and standardised. The fact that these items appear with stable frequencies across authors and decades suggests that women writers were working within a broadly shared technical vocabulary of the kitchen, which supports the idea of the recipe as a codified technology of domestic work.

Transitivity patterns further refine this picture in Hallidayan terms. The predominance of material clauses reflects what Halliday terms a “grammar of doing”, in which processes of manipulation, transformation and control are foregrounded (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The cook is regularly construed as Actor and the ingredients as Affected, which positions the human participant as an agent capable of transforming raw materials into culturally valued dishes. Relational clauses, by contrast, realise attributive and identifying meanings that function as evaluative checkpoints within the process: “the sauce is thick”, “the pudding is done” and thus act as checkpoints that define success (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). This alternation between material and relational processes supports

what can be described as a “grammar of control”, whereby progress is regulated through monitored states and outcomes. Mental and verbal processes appear rarely and in circumscribed roles, typically when the writer invites sensory verification (“taste if it be seasoned enough”) or invokes external authority. Their limited presence aligns with SFL descriptions of instructional genres as privileging external action over internal cognition or dialogue (Eggins, 2004).

Tenor, in SFL, concerns the social relations enacted between participants and is realised through the Mood system and modality (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The dominance of imperatives represents the unmarked interpersonal choice for procedural discourse, encoding asymmetrical authority oriented towards task completion (Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Bare imperatives such as “take”, “put”, “stir” and “boil” give the text its procedural rhythm and construct a social relation in which the writer commands practical expertise and the reader is expected to comply step by step. Declaratives, while less frequent, play important supporting roles: they offer rationales, describe states or summarise the outcomes of preceding actions. Their presence signals that the authors are not merely issuing orders but also explaining and evaluating, which contributes to the didactic ethos of the genre.

Within this imperative framework, the pattern *let + it + V* emerges as a crucial interpersonal resource for modulating command while maintaining control (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). As shown numerically in Table 2, the construction is very frequent, almost rivalling core modal auxiliaries in relative terms. This construction combines imperative force with interpersonal mitigation, allowing authority to be exercised without overt imposition. Functionally, “let it boil”, “let it stand”, “let it cool” introduce an indirectness that tempers the force of the command. By construing the process as something that is allowed to occur, the writer softens the imposition on the reader while still maintaining control over the sequence. At the same time, the choice of the non-human pronoun “it” foregrounds the evolving preparation rather than the human Actor, which cooperates with the material field in keeping attention on the food rather than on the cook. The ease with which this pattern combines with circumstantial Themes (“when it boils, let it simmer gently”; “after it has cooled, let it be cut in slices”) suggests that it functions as a flexible interface between temporal management and interpersonal guidance.

Modal verbs further realise tenor through graded obligation and inclination, as described in the SFL system of modality (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The high frequency of “must” corresponds to points where the obligation is non-negotiable, especially in matters of safety or hygiene: pans “must be very clean” and the cook “must take care” that ingredients do not burn. These clauses protect both the dish and, implicitly, the health of those who will consume it, and they project a strong, authoritative voice. By contrast, “should” formulates best practice without the same level of compulsion, often linked to quality (“the soup should be clear”) or to ideal conditions. “May” and “can” open up options or alternative methods, framing the writer as someone who anticipates different household circumstances and allows for flexibility, while “might”, “would” and “could” are used to make tentative suggestions or hypothetical improvements. Together with the *let + it + V* construction, these modal choices reflect a tutelary tenor in which expertise is asserted but reader agency is acknowledged (Martin & Rose, 2007).

Mode refers to the role language plays in the situation and is realised through textual systems such as Theme–Rheme organisation and cohesion (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Eggins, 2004). The frequent use of circumstantial Themes corresponds to marked Theme choices that foreground temporal sequencing in written procedures (Eggins, 2004): “when cold”, “before serving”, “after it has boiled”. This choice makes the text highly

processable for readers who are simultaneously following physical operations; the thematic position gives them, in advance, the temporal frame within which the next action is relevant. Non-finite Themes framed as purposes, such as “to clarify the butter” or “to make a richer sauce”, orient the reader towards the goal of a sub-sequence, signalling shifts in the stage of the recipe without resorting to metadiscourse. Cohesive devices such as *then*, *next* and *until* realise textual continuity in line with Halliday and Hasan’s account of cohesion in procedural texts (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

Taken together, these patterns form a coherent registerial configuration reflecting the alignment of field, tenor and mode in response to recurrent social purposes (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Rather than appearing as isolated features, the lexical, grammatical and textual choices work together to implement a stable “grammar of control”, in which actions, conditions and outcomes are carefully managed while allowing limited flexibility. From an SFL perspective, such regularity reflects register stabilisation, whereby repeated social activity gives rise to predictable patterns across metafunctions (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

7. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter describes the registerial profile of nineteenth-century cooking recipes written by women and explains how it reflects domestic cookery. Using a specialised subcorpus of COWITE19 and a systemic functional perspective, the study examines how transitivity, mood and modality, and thematic organisation encode experience, social relations and information flow. The results show that these recipes form a highly stabilised written register aligned with the variables of field, tenor and mode.

Regarding RQ1, the analysis of transitivity shows that experience is overwhelmingly constructed through material processes centred on a restricted set of high-frequency verbs such as “put”, “take”, “boil”, “add”, “mix”, “stir” and “pour”. Together with a compact inventory of culinary nouns, these verbs foreground the concrete operations defining domestic cookery. Relational clauses such as “the pudding is done” or “the sauce is thick” function as evaluative checkpoints, while mental and verbal processes are limited to sensory testing or occasional citation. Overall, cooking is construed as a chain of controllable actions and outcomes.

RQ2 examined how mood and modality construct the tenor between writers and readers. The findings reveal a strong preference for imperatives, which structure the instructional discourse and position the author as an expert guide. Declaratives serve specialised explanatory roles, and interrogatives are virtually absent. Within this framework, let-constructions and graded modal verbs (“must”, “should”, “may”, “can”) produce a tenor that is authoritative yet considerate, calibrating obligation while allowing for variation.

RQ3 focused on how thematic organisation supports the procedural mode. Clauses are regularly anchored by circumstantial themes, especially temporal ones such as “when cold” or “before serving”, which locate actions within the sequence. Non-finite Themes expressing purpose signal local goals, while cohesive devices like “then”, “next” and “until” mark progression and closure, creating a linear, low-ambiguity script.

Taken together, the findings show that nineteenth-century women’s recipes in COWITE19 constitute a coherent register in which linguistic choices are tightly bound to context. The field is encoded through material processes and technical nouns, the tenor through imperatives and graded modality, and the mode through systematic thematic

sequencing and simple cohesive ties. These texts thus function as carefully engineered instruments for stabilising practice and transmitting domestic expertise.

The study nevertheless has limitations. Its synchronic focus smooths over diachronic and regional variation that may illuminate shifts in domestic ideology and readership. Future research could exploit COWITE19 metadata to trace change over time or compare British and American texts, or extend the analysis to other instructive genres such as sewing manuals.

By grounding domestic expertise in detailed linguistic description, the study shows that nineteenth-century cooking recipes represent a calibrated semiotic response to household management and gendered authority. Register therefore emerges as an explanatory construct linking linguistic form to social function, and COWITE19 proves a valuable resource for tracing women's instructional writing in modern domestic life.

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