



# Dishing up Distinction: Language Materiality and Multimodal Coherence in Elite Foodways

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This paper arises as part of a discourse-focused commodity chain analysis of elite foodways in the international airline industry. At the center of this critical intervention sits the business class airline meal as an epitomic manifestation of contemporary class privilege. As both a fraught social hieroglyphic and a complex semiotic assemblage, “premium” airline dining is articulated across different sites and through a range of different communicative practices and modes. With this in mind, we examine the language materiality of plateware (crockery), flatware (cutlery), glassware, and other tableware used for staging and promoting airline meal services. The specific object of our analysis is the transmodal interplay between words and things which helps generate both the *cohesion* and *coherence* of meals. This kind of textual unity and “inter-semiotic harmony” is key for the performative production of order which is, in turn, central to the classist production of distinction and (elite) status.

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## INTRODUCTION

No paper written under the title of “distinction” is complete without reference to Bourdieu’s (1984) famous treatise on the social production of taste. In this work, he inevitably considers foodways—the treatment and eating of food—as a key site for the production of habitus. This is where gustatory taste and social taste merge. Bourdieu is particularly interested in contrasting the bourgeoisie foodways with those of the working class who, he argues, are committed to both “plain speaking” and “plain eating” (p. 194). Unlike the “free-and-easy working-class meal” (p. 196), the bourgeois meal is structured by constraint and complexity, as well as by a preoccupation with aesthetics and form-over-function. This is how Bourdieu (p. 196) sums things up:

The [bourgeois] manner of presenting and consuming the food ... [the] whole commitment to stylization tends to shift the emphasis from substance and function to form and manner, and so to deny the crudely material reality of the act of eating and of the things consumed ...

Understood thus, meals are not simply about eating—the base act of feeding oneself—but a socially invested performance of lifestyle and status. The specific examples, Bourdieu gives for this “aestheticization of practice” include the refinement of the food stuffs prepared, the strict sequencing of dishes, hierarchical seating arrangements, a censorship of overt signs of pleasure (e.g., eating noises), and “correct” ways of sitting, the serving of food, and the handling of utensils. Of particular relevance to our current purposes, there is one other important marker of “fine dining”



**FIGURE 1** | Visual extract from webpage; airline#1<sup>1</sup>.

which Bourdieu identifies: “the presentation of the dishes, considered as much in terms of shape and color (like works of art) as of their consumable substance” (p. 196). We imagine that Bourdieu is here thinking more specifically about the plating of food; this is certainly something we ourselves plan to consider at a later stage. For now, though, we want to focus on the dishes themselves: the plates, cutlery, glasses, napkins and other material artifacts, which are implied by Bourdieu but otherwise overlooked. In this regard, and orienting to our main analysis, we offer an initial glimpse into the world of contemporary bourgeois dining which is our empirical focus. We will discuss these materials properly a little later but Extract 1 and **Figure 1** show how one international airline choses to frame—both verbally and visually—its “premium” meal service with specific reference to the tableware used.

Extract 1: Webpage copy; airline#1

*We know that visual pleasure heightens the senses, so we have carefully selected traditional elegant French tableware to intensify your gastronomic experience.*

In focusing on food *things* as opposed to foodstuff, we are taking an even more literal approach to substance and form than Bourdieu himself. Having said which, the point we want to make is precisely that the heightened attention to things is all part of the overall, orchestrated performance of the bourgeois meal and its status-making efforts. Furthermore, it is not only the things themselves that are important but also their detailed arrangement and especially their excessive narration. It is not enough for utensils, plates, glasses, and napkins to be present on the table (although this is in itself performative of status); they must be certain kinds of utensils, plates, glasses, and napkins which must also be arranged in particular, “correct” ways. Even more than this, the dining equipment must also be articulated into the meal—linked aesthetically to the food itself and often explicitly narrated into the overall practice. Especially in an

age of artful reproduction, it is usually not enough to have a porcelain plate or a linen napkin; diners must be told this is so<sup>2</sup>.

Located in the intensely classed field of eating, our paper presents a social-semiotic analysis of the particular role plateware, flatware and other tableware appear to play in producing distinction and in materializing taste, both gustatory and social. The paper is part of a much larger project concerned with a discourse-centered commodity chain analysis of the Business Class meal as an epitomic manifestation of contemporary class privilege/inequality (see Thurlow, 2020a). As part of this project, Thurlow (2020b) has examined the role of menus in helping to orchestrate the “material ecology” (Mondada, 2019, p. 118) of the meal; in this case, the focus was on the non-verbal resources used for designing menus and, thereby, for producing distinction and prestige—specifically, their textural, tactile and other haptic properties. For this analysis, Thurlow worked directly—and tangibly—with a convenience sample of menus. In our current paper, we are turning to another dimension of the site, the same material ecology: the tableware. This time our evidence is somewhat different, relying as we do on promotional texts (verbal and visual) where airlines tout their “premium” (i.e., First Class and Business Class) dining services. We use this data to highlight the role of language materiality—the interplay of words and things—in creating the *multimodal cohesion* of the texts themselves but also the overall *multimodal coherence* of the meal. We will argue that this kind of textual unity and “inter-semiotic harmony” (Stöckl, 2014, p. 292) is key for the performative production of order which, in turn, is central to the classist production of status distinction and status.

## MAIN CONCEPTS: LANGUAGE MATERIALITY, COHESION/COHERENCE, CULINARY ARTS

Multimodal discourse analysis is, in short, a social semiotic approach which understands how any single communicative

<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, all images are reproduced under fair dealing and fair use principles for the purposes of scholarly comment and criticism. We have chosen not to name the airlines because (a) we want to anonymize them for copyright reasons; (b) we do not want to reinscribe cultural-national stereotypes which are irrelevant to our analysis; and (c) we want to avoid being implicated in advertising the airlines.

<sup>2</sup>As Bourdieu explains, these material properties of dining—the plates, etc.—sometimes also become talking points; as such, they are resources by which diners align themselves socially while reinscribing the symbolic economies upon which their status is dependent.

action necessarily draws on a multiplicity of modes for generating meaning (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001; also Jewitt, 2009, for an overview). Notwithstanding, different modes function in their own right; in other words, color, sound, space, touch are as communicatively rich, and “grammatically” sophisticated as speech or writing. As a social semiotic approach, multimodal discourse analysis typically looks beyond the “content” of texts or other representational practices to examine how the choice and combination of modes or semiotic resources is laden with communicative, epistemological and ideological significance. Van Leeuwen (2005, p. 285) explains things like this:

Semiotic resources have a meaning potential, based on their past uses, and a set of affordances based on their possible uses, and these will be actualized in concrete social contexts where their use is subject to some form of semiotic regime.

### Language Materiality and Elite Discourse

Multimodal discourse analyses are often concerned to show how semiotics actions—texts and practices—are embedded in larger economic and cultural practices, and to speculate on the social and political implications of these semiotic actions. One example of this social semiotic approach—and the current paper’s immediate critical-analytical context—is author Thurlow’s collaborative research on elite/elitist discourse (e.g., Thurlow, 2015, 2016; Thurlow and Jaworski, 2017b). Thurlow and his colleague demonstrate how the rhetorics of elite status—like the discourses of luxury—are nowadays ubiquitous and expressed in the most fastidious ways. More importantly, however, these rhetorics are also fully multimodal and often strategically so. Elite/elitist discourse invariably hinges on a complex, but oddly precarious, syntagmatic coalition of signs and practices—what Scollon (2001) terms a “nexus of practice” or what we would call a semiotic assemblage: the intersection of different modes and practices. It is only as part of these broader assemblages that specific texts or semiotic actions are made meaningful (aka coherent; see below). It is only in this way that we can—and people presumably do—make sense of the snippets of cheap, blue and red carpeting in the run up to Business- and First-Class check-in desks at airports, with matching, color-coded signage, orchids on the counters, and dream-like images of premium seating. Outside their elaborately narrated—which is to say verbalized—environment, these semiotic displays may appear both pointless and worthless.

It is for this reason precisely that the architects of luxury landscapes can be understood as both “aestheticians” who make banal stuff appear valuable or simple services feel exceptional, but also as “synaestheticians” who appeal to people’s innate ability to shift between and read across different semiotic modes (cf. Kress, 1997, p. 36–37). One such synaesthetic tactic is the constant interplay of words and things, producing a world of what Thurlow and Jaworski (2017a) call “word-things” and

“thing-words.”<sup>3</sup> What is signaled by these terms is (a) the way that objects are framed by, or semiotized into, words, and (b) the way words can be materialized into tangible objects and commodities. This, say Shankar and Cavanaugh (2012) is why it makes little sense to speak of language *and* materiality—as if language were ever ontologically or effectively immaterial. Instead, they opt for “language materiality” as an analytic for theorizing and investigating the interplay of words and things. We ourselves find it useful for understanding the kinds of transmodal practices at work in our data (see Newfield, 2014, for a neat account of transmodalization vis-à-vis related notions like transduction or modal translation). Ultimately, language materiality is central to how individual texts are designed and organized, and how the entire discursive regime is produced and circulated. This brings us to our other key concept or organization principle.

### Multimodal Cohesion and Coherence

For the sake of transparency, we want briefly to define what we understand by *multimodal coherence* and explain how it relates to the closely related notion of *multimodal cohesion*<sup>4</sup>. To start, we rely on the following neat explication offered by Carey Jewitt and colleagues (MODE, 2012, np, emphasis theirs), who themselves draw on the foundational ideas of Halliday and Hasan (1976) and the more recent work of Van Leeuwen (2005):

*Coherence* names the effect of arrangements such that everything in the arrangement gives the appearance of “naturally” belonging together. ... *Cohesive ties* refers to the entities through which coherence is explicitly produced—that is the ways in which texts are made to hang together.

In these terms, coherence concerns the way communicative texts, signs or events belong together and make sense as practices. Cohesion meanwhile concerns the connections established between different elements within a text, sign or event. In short, cohesion concerns texts proper, while coherence concerns texts as part of practices.

Across the literature, things are somewhat more confusing. Bateman (2014a), for example, uses the “hanging together” aspect of texts as an explanation for cohesion, but elsewhere (Bateman, 2014b) offers no explicit definition for coherence. For his part, Van Leeuwen (2005) refers, again without explanation, to coherence while ostensibly discussing cohesion. Regardless, and rather like MODE (2012) and Bateman (2014a), we treat

<sup>3</sup>In thinking about transmodal exchanges, Gal (2013) writes about the “tastes of talk,” using Peircean semiotics to explain another sensuous toggling between material properties and linguistic/vocal properties.

<sup>4</sup>While they undoubtedly help push the field in good analytical directions, the six papers in a recent special issue on multimodal cohesion (see Schubert and Sanchez-Stockhammer, 2022) are otherwise still restricted to textual data; for example, films, videos, comics, advertisements and recipes. Once again, the innovation lies largely in the orientation to visual and/or moving image, and the kinds of cohesion enacted through word-image relations. One exception (Tseng et al., 2021) was an inventively designed study of films which partly focused on nonverbal sound-image relations. For the most part, however, no attempt is made to move the field into really new semiotic terrains or multimodal interactions.

cohesion and coherence as two closely interrelated social semiotic actions, but not as the same thing (see also Carrell, 1982). To this end, and somewhat more aligned with Stöckl (2015), we take cohesion to be something *intratextually* generated and coherence to be something more *extratextually* generated and contextually dependent (see also Brown and Yule, 1983).

It is for this reason, too, that we consider coherence to be a matter of—indeed, constitutive of—what others refer to as a *nexus of practice* (Scollon, 2001) or *semiotic assemblage* (cf. Pennycook, 2018) and, in turn, of even wider *discursive formations* (cf. Foucault, 1972).

What is most important for our current purposes is that both cohesion and coherence may be—and typically are—accomplished multimodally. In their original work on cohesion, for example, Halliday & Hasan (ibid.) identify two main types of connections: lexical (e.g., words which “go together” by dint of their formulaic association) and grammatical (e.g., through anaphoric referencing or conjunction). These same types of cohesive ties may be accomplished using semiotic resources other than language. Here, we think of color rhyming (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002) in an advertisement as a “grammatical,” conjunctive tie. In a film, meanwhile, we might understand sound effects or the musical score as connecting “lexically” with moving images. In the context of our current analysis of the Business-Class meal, it seems obvious that plates, knives, forks, spoons, glasses, napkins are paradigmatic—from an established set of signs—and therefore lexically cohesive. By the same token, and as we will discuss, the conventionalized arrangement of silverware vis-à-vis the plate is grammatically cohesive. Of course, the convention of fork on the left and knife on the right—or the dessert spoon pointing to the left—is both culturally specific (as are knives and forks themselves) and ideological (as left-handers know only too well).

While matters of cohesion are not without relevance to us in the current paper, our primary focus is the overall coherence-producing effect of these connections or ties. This is also the point at which coherence becomes socially and politically significant. Following the definition above, therefore, we are interested in the way plateware, silverware and glassware are deployed as semiotic resources contributing to the overall staging (and promotion) of the “premium” airline meal. These material resources are made coherent in a number of ways, at a number of levels (cf. Stöckl, 2015): initially, in the advertising of premium (meal) services where the materials are visually displayed and verbally narrated; then within the immediate setting of their use with food in a meal; then in conjunction with other texts/practices like the menu and the service; and then in the wider symbolic economies of “premium” airline service, elite status production, and contemporary class formations (see Thurlow, 2015, 2016). At each point, each level, it is possible to consider how the relevant texts and practices function as cohesive units connected by different semiotic modes. However, the plates, knives, forks, etc. really only *cohere*—are made meaningful—through their overall arrangement and situated use. In the current case, this entails the wider semiotic assemblage of the “premium” meal and of elite foodways.

## Culinary Arts and/as the Semiotics of Dining

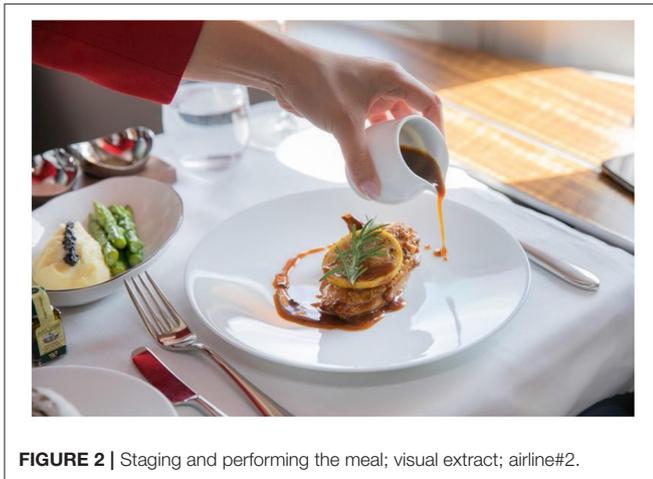
The empirical focus of this paper aligns us closely with the multidisciplinary world of what is either called culinary arts or food design (see Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014; Zampollo, 2016). Grounded in both applied and academic practice, these fields consider not only the preparation of food but also its presentation (i.e., plating), as well as the design of eating spaces and eating practices—which, in turn, includes plateware<sup>5</sup>. This kind of multimodal, multisensory approach is not simply a conceptual or analytical matter; at every level food and eating are psychosomatically experienced as intersemiotic. In this regard, Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman (2014) present a comprehensive review of research demonstrating how the size, shape, weight or color of plateware (and, to some extent, flatware) can influence the way people consume, appreciate and even taste food<sup>6</sup>. White plates—a strong professional preference—can determine perceived intensity of flavors, although this varies depending on the type and color of the food itself. Other studies show how the plating of food—its composition (e.g., quantity, variety, textures, and color combinations) and layout are significant in terms of the degree to which people sense food as attractive and/or appealing. In terms of flatware, studies suggest that the quality of cutlery (e.g., metal vs. plastic) can influence how eaters perceive the quality of the food, just as the type of metal (e.g., zinc vs. stainless steel) can affect how people taste the food being eaten. Spencer and Piqueras-Fiszman also cite an industrial design study targeting synaesthetic relations between, say, the texture and color of flatware and the taste of food.

Given scientific evidence for the literal, experiential multimodality of eating, it strikes us as especially strange that scholars in multimodal discourse studies and social semiotics have had little or no interest in the sensory materialities of food *per se*. Perhaps this is because of our habitual interest in words and images—in “texty texts” (Thurlow, 2020b, p. 2). There is certainly much written about the “language of food,” its verbal and sometimes also visual representation (notable examples include: Stano, 2016; Cavanaugh and Riley, 2017; Karrebæk et al., 2018; Mapes, 2021)<sup>7</sup>. Across this work, scholars

<sup>5</sup>Co-author of *The Perfect Meal: The Multisensory Science of Food and Dining*, Charles Spence heads the Crossmodal Research Laboratory in the Department of Experimental Psychology at Oxford University.

<sup>6</sup>Riley and Cavanaugh (2017) do a nice job of parsing the “language of food” into three different relationships: language-about-food (i.e., the verbal representation of food), language-around-food (e.g., dinner table conversations), and language-through-food (i.e., the way foods take on or come to stand for symbolic values such as wealth or passion).

<sup>7</sup>There are numerous “trade” books about plating; these are published with titles like *The Art of Food Presentation*, *Food Presentation Secrets*, and *Story on a Plate*. Professionalizing initiatives include the University of West London’s degree programmes in culinary arts and the Dutch Institute of Food & Design. Unilever Food Solutions likewise offers its own suite of online plating resources including five Current Plating Trends which, we learn, are: landscape plating; free-form plating; plating on organic materials like slate or stone; plating on “futuristic” materials like glass or steel; and plating with alternative receptacles like test tubes or jam jars. It is a matter of time before these trends make their way on board.



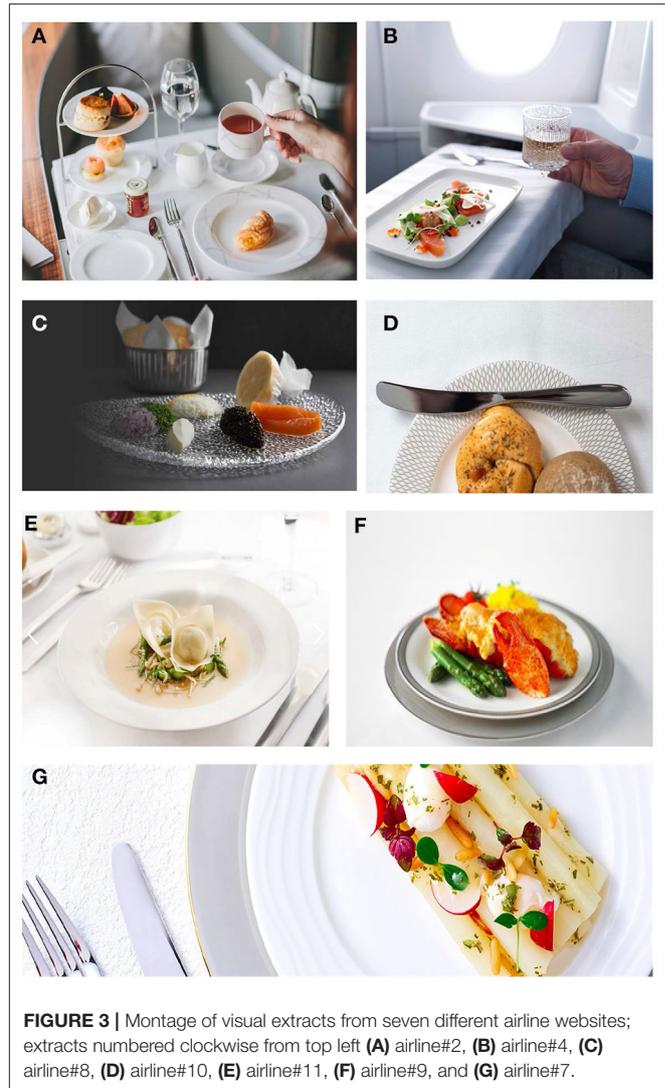
**FIGURE 2** | Staging and performing the meal; visual extract; airline#2.

are committed to materialist critiques—including the political economies of foodways—but invariably shy away from the stuff of food itself which would require greater attention to non-verbal modes like smell, touch, taste, color, etc. This is true even for De Solier (2013) ethnographically informed but otherwise interview-heavy book which bears “material culture” in its title. Scholars seem to assume the thematic food is self-evidently and sufficiently material, that it can be written about without paying attention to its actual material, sensory and often non-representational qualities.

In theorizing the meal as a Gestalt, Parasecoli notes how “things” thus become semiotic objects within a semiosphere only in a network of relations with other signifying objects and specific organisms” (p. 651). The social and cultural meaning of a meal or of a specific dish in the meal is always more than a simple matter of its ingredients—of the food itself. In other words, stuff becomes edible *foodstuff* through its enculturated, conventionalized use which, one assumes, also includes its being enfolded into the network of actions, articulations and artifacts that constitute eating. And this surely includes the flatware, plateware, and other tableware.

## ANALYSIS: THE THING-WORDS AND WORD-THINGS OF “PREMIUM” DINING

Our data is drawn from a convenience sample of airline websites collected by author Haudenschild in October 2020. Starting with an initial listing of 80 international airlines, we identified 36 which offered explicit information about their “premium” meal services. From this sample, we pulled together all verbal and visual depictions of the meals being served in either Business Class or First Class. This dataset included images of dishes and passengers eating, but we focused on images which exclusively or primarily depicted tableware together with all verbal copy about tableware. We do not claim that this sampling procedure was highly systematic or comprehensive; we do however believe it was generally representative and sufficient for our analytical purposes. By focusing specifically on so-called *premium* dining



**FIGURE 3** | Montage of visual extracts from seven different airline websites; extracts numbered clockwise from top left (A) airline#2, (B) airline#4, (C) airline#8, (D) airline#10, (E) airline#11, (F) airline#9, and (G) airline#7.

services, our analysis is premised on the fact that we are dealing with a social semiotics which is explicitly elite or elitist (see Thurlow and Jaworski, 2017b). In the paper, we present figures and extracts from different airlines (with the exception of Figures 2, 3A which are from the same airline) for illustrating how the tableware discourse is multimodally and cohesively constituted, and also how these transmodal, language-material resources help produce the meal as a coherent text or practice. In this regard, and as a way to start, we return to Extract 1 and Figure 1.

## Entextualizing Coherence and Order

The wording in Extract 1 appeared below the image in Figure 1, a good example of what Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, p. 59) would characterize as a conceptual image which depicts a kind of “stable or timeless essence.” The image is also typical of the way airlines—their marketers at least—so specifically and exclusively display their tableware. This plateware, glassware and flatware is,

we are told, the material manifestation of Frenchness, tradition and elegance. Note the accessories which, in addition to a small (gravy?) jug include salt and pepper pots, and a tablecloth subtly indexicalized as linen through the drawn-thread work shown on the left-hand side (running top to bottom). The last items are the quintessential “stuff of status” (see Thurlow, 2015, on a pepper pot and a fake-linen napkin). Particularly striking here are the two high-modality metadiscursive claims made: “visual pleasure heightens the senses” and “tableware to intensify your gastronomic experience.”

Through these kinds of synaesthetic appeals, material resources are deliberately deployed for producing the meal as a *coherent* performance of both gustatory and social taste. Typically for elite discourse (again, see Thurlow and Jaworski, 2017a), passengers are persuaded to believe that the tableware has also been “carefully selected,” a rhetorical claim which is paralleled in the accompanying image through the meticulously placed and orderly arranged items. The image functions also as a superlative performance of plenty—three glasses, three bowls, three plates; the equipment metonymically also indexing plentiful food and drink—a feast. These kinds of multimodal ties—across verbal and visual content—make the texts themselves internally cohesive; this, we suggest, entextualizes a sense of consistency and order. In much the same way, the image itself finds cohesion in the monochromatic uniformity of the plateware; as Thurlow and Jaworski (2010) have shown previously, these are semiotic tactics used for indexing quietude and order.

Along the same lines, we offer two more verbal and visual examples of multimodal coherence at work in our dataset: **Figure 2** which depicts an enacted meal service and then, from another airline, Extract 2 which demonstrates nicely the detailed language used for narrating or “wordifying” things. These materials are drawn from two other airlines.

**Figure 2** is a very typical example of the way labor is visualized in elite or luxury advertising (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2014) as simultaneously visible and invisible (i.e., a “disembodied” hand showing an act of labor but not the laborer). This image is stylistically recognizable as a mix of stock photography and food photography (e.g., saturated, high-focus, well-lit). Of central interest is the display of flatware, glassware and plateware—each item contributing to the cohesive *entexturing* of the food. Again, we also have accessories: a table cloth, salt and pepper *dishes* (sic; top left), and another personal gravy jug—this time in action. Compositionally speaking, the main course is made salient through its centering, but also through the concentric framing of the plate (with a high shine and plenty of empty space) and the circular pouring of the gravy. We note here how the plating—the presentation of the food—uses an enregistered “restaurant style.” Admittedly this is a highly staged advertising image, but we rely on it as a partial insight into the live performance of serving the meal<sup>8</sup>. Ultimately, therefore, the

meal confirms itself as a fully multimodal practice constituted by the “internal” tying together of material artifacts, food, color, taste/smell, and embodied actions and spatializations (arrangements and settings). In turn, together with whatever fancy ingredients are being used, the interplay of these different semiotic resources produces the meal as a fully coherent performance of “fine dining” and distinction. Understood as an expression of “inter-semiotic harmony” (Stöckl, 2014, p. 292), this multimodal coherence generates precisely the kind of order and orderliness upon which luxury spaces depend (see Thurlow and Jaworski, 2012). We will return to this in a moment *vis-à-vis* **Figure 3**.

In Extract 2, we have an example of the way language materiality functions as a key transmodalizing resource which, in turn, is central to both the multimodal cohesion of individual texts but also the multimodal coherence of the practice/discourse of “premium” dining. Here, and following Thurlow and Jaworski (2017a), we call attention to the “wordification” of tableware. This is a matter of airlines teaching passengers the preferred meaning of the things that lie beside the food, ostensibly just to “emphasize” the quality of the service but, evidently, treated as central enough to warrant such detailed accounts.

Extract 2: Webpage copy; airline#3

*The First Class experience is not only reflected on the plate, but in all the tableware as well: pure design and refined touches such as salt and pepper mills for each passenger, an additional bowl of olive oil, elegant glass carafes on the First Class bar containing three different types of water, a fine china (sic) cheese platter, high-quality cutlery and a stylish serviette ring emphasize the first-class service on board.*

As is typical of luxury discourse and the landscapes of super-elite mobilities—especially those at 30,000 feet—there is little information about material substances other than “china” and “glass.” The basic equipment is listed (plate, mills, bowl, cutlery, serviette ring) along with pointedly lexicalized references to “carafes” and “platter” (and a “bar”). For the most part, however, the meaning of things depends mostly on their being transmodalized through language, hence: “pure design,” “refined touches,” “elegant,” “high-quality,” “fine,” “stylish,” and “first-class.” Even water warrants qualification as “three different types.” Language also encodes and underscores the sense of plenty (“additional bowl”) and special treatment (“for each passenger”). At times, the line between the culinary act of eating and its discursive framing—between eating and reading about it—is a fuzzy one.

It may seem hard to imagine that such material frippery would amount to much in the minds of passengers. However, it is precisely their relative immateriality or unimportance which renders them powerful. It is not the practical utility of the silverware or plateware that really counts but rather its *expressive* function, but this is only fully realized by their being rendered

<sup>8</sup>In terms of service, we know from our research that the meal is strictly choreographed, with premium-cabin flight attendants being trained how to plate (either in the galley or at the table) and sometimes being given detailed, step-by-step manuals for guidance (We have one of these manuals from a major European airline). An insight into this can be found in this 2017 news story feature (with

video) about Qantas: <https://www.themercury.com.au/qantas-meal-service-how-they-train-flight-attendants/news-story/4f3fb9553b900073e978d195aae12fe2>.

coherent within the overall story of the meal (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2006). As Rom Harré (2002, p. 32) explains, “things [become] social objects only within the dynamic frames of story-lines.” In other words, the various meal stuff is given social meaning and symbolic power only by being woven into the narrative performances of airline marketing and within the wider cultural discourses of class, status, distinction, and privilege. We see this in action most clearly in the next section of our analysis.

## Wordification and Interdiscursive Coherence

Having established some of the key multimodal/transmodal processes at work—and demonstrated both textual cohesion and discursive coherence at work—we step back for a broader overview of our dataset. It is this which reminds us how the coherence—multimodal or otherwise—of the premium meals is produced through the reiterative use of these semiotic resources over time and across space. Any piece of airline marketing “hangs together” also because it is networked interdiscursively (e.g., to restaurant dining or Frenchness) and intertextually to other marketing (by the same airline or competitor airlines) and, of course, to the knowledge people have of Economy Class. Again, while cohesion emerges as an intratextual phenomenon, coherence ultimately depends on extratextual relations.

As we have shown in the examples thus far, objects and the materiality of things do indeed play a key part in the promotion of premium inflight dining. In addition to salt and pepper mills and carafes, other accessories mentioned in our dataset included the following: “oil bottle” and “oil pipette,” “breadbasket,” “sauce boat,” “little milk can” and “soya sauce jug,” “flutes,” “glass serving dome,” “bell cover,” “candy box” and “cake stand.” Elsewhere, we see otherwise banal flatware, plateware and other tableware evidently requiring qualification: “heart-shaped spoon,” “special knife for bread and butter,” “special plate for bread,” “gold napkin ring,” and “cloth napkin.” These are more language-material examples of the way things invariably must be wordified for them to have the desired symbolic or cultural significance. Having said which, objects like breadbaskets and napkin rings are de facto distinctive because they are not usually present in Economy Class services, where bread rolls are singular and plastic-wrapped and napkins are plastic-wrapped along with (plastic) cutlery. In one case, distinction is materialized more concretely or tangibly through the use of a “cloth bow” around the napkin, although even this evidently needs promoting, which is to say narrating in language.

The wordification of plateware, flatware and other tableware is far more extensive, although quite patterned. In this regard, we highlight the following tropes illustrated with longer collocational stretches. For example:

### Extracts 3–7

- ... a collection of exclusive tableware and textiles [airline #4]
- Luxury table settings using designer linens, plates and cutlery. [airline #5]
- Sleek, elegant wine glasses, champagne flutes, a tea service, candy box, bell cover for hot platters... [airline #1]

- ... served on high-quality porcelain tableware on a carefully laid-out table... [airline #6]
- ... served on handcrafted Italian crystal [airline #7]

In Extracts 3–7, things and their material properties are invoked, sometimes straightforwardly [“tableware” (x2), “plates,” “cutlery,” “wine glasses”], other times somewhat more pointedly (“porcelain,” “linens,” “flutes,” “platters,” and “crystal”). From across the dataset as a whole, we find porcelain and/or just china mentioned frequently in various guises: fine porcelain, special lightweight porcelain, fine porcelain china, fine china fine bone chinaware, bone china, finest china, and high-quality china. Once again, the distinctiveness of china is only realized by association with—rather disassociation from—Economy Class. In other words, the discursive production of the “premium” meal is coherent partly through processes of semiotic exclusion—plastic, for example.

As before, in Extracts 3–7, qualifiers such as “exclusive” and “high-quality,” “luxury,” “sleek” and “elegant” appear necessary, along with direct (“tea service”) and indirect (“carefully laid”) references to inflight service, as well as the implicit laboring “handcrafted.” In our dataset, several classes of qualifier appeared frequently for characterizing the meal service as a whole; these were: *national pride* (e.g., “quintessentially British”), *tradition and authenticity* (e.g., “handcrafted” or “crafted”), *modernity and newness* (e.g., “contemporary,” “innovative,” “upgraded”), *tailored/personal service* (e.g., “dedicated,” “unique,” “one-of-a-kind,” “customized,” “personal”), *standards of excellence* (e.g., “exceptional,” “exquisite,” “award-winning,” “high-end,” “renowned,” “world-class,” “refined,” “top-quality”) and *affective/aesthetic values* (e.g., “memorable,” “exciting,” “pleasing,” “beautiful,” “pure,” “harmonious,” “stylish,” and “elegant”). As a kind of lexical inflation (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2006), this evaluative labeling helps transform otherwise generic referents into something more specific and/or special.

Returning to Extracts 3 to 7, we find a slightly different indexicality at work in the use of “collection,” “textiles,” and “designer” which point interdiscursively to the fashion industry. In this regard, a key distinction-generating tactic was the outward referencing of named designers or design brands, as in Extracts 8–11.

### Extracts 8–11

- The stylish cutlery in the First cabin is designed by the quintessentially British and award-winning designer William Welch and Studio William [airline #8]
- ... stylish tableware designed by David Caon [airline #9]
- Bone china tableware from Wedgwood sits atop crisp linen on your personal dining table [airline #10]
- meals are presented on Royal Doulton fine bone china with exclusive Robert Welch cutlery [airline #11]

To be sure, this appeal to designers/designer brand is pervasive in our dataset; other brands mentioned Jean-Marie Massaud, Bernardaud, Christofle (silversmith), Bernardaud & Degrenne, Eugeni Quitllet, Philippe Starck, Marimekko, Asa, Riedel Wedgwood, William Edwards, Alessi, Royal Doulton, Jonnie

Boer, and Marcel Wanders. Again, the point here is that certain plates, glasses or knives and forks are not inherently or obviously distinctive; this must be achieved through explicit naming and labeling. And these brand invocations help to reinscribe the cultural and material value of the plateware and thus the “goodness” of the meal itself.

Finally, and as one of the defining interdiscursive references, the underlying appeal to restaurant dining surfaces in Extracts 11–14 (note again “carefully laid-out”) where we also find the specific signaling of high-end dining: “gourmet,” “Michelin-starred” and “good.” Verbal representations of restaurants are arguably a transmodalization of spatial resources.

#### Extracts 11–14

- *bistro-style meal service* [airline #12]
- ... *you will dine as if you were in a gourmet restaurant.* [airline #13]
- ... *tableware worthy of a Michelin-starred restaurant.* ... [airline #1]
- ... *on a carefully laid-out table will make you feel like in a good restaurant* [airline #6]

These different rhetorical appeals to extratextual and even “extra-discursive” domains (i.e., fashion, designers, restaurants) are key tactics for framing the equipment and, in turn, the meal service as distinctive. It is in this way that the meal emerges as a coherent nexus of practice (Scollon, 2001) constituted multimodally. Speaking of which, we want briefly to consider some examples of the way these rhetorical appeals are visualized too.

## The Visual Rhetorics of Orderliness

In thinking about the visual rhetorics at work in our data, we offer the montage in **Figure 3** which contains seven typical images selected from different airlines. As before, we rely on these images for three reasons: first, to demonstrate some of the ways multimodal cohesion is achieved within the frame of the website texts; second, as evidence for the way different semiotic material resources contribute to the overall coherence of the meal; and third, for likewise showing how these multimodal texts and practices performatively produce the kind of order/orderliness central to the classist production of distinction and (elite) status.

The seven visual extracts in **Figure 3** all draw attention to the tableware which, following Van Leeuwen (2005) is made salient through a range of semiotic resources or design choices:

- *Contrast*; for example, a colored or patterned plate against a white table cloth (**Figures 3C,D**) or a sharply focused plate against a blurred backdrop (**Figure 3G**).
- *Placement*; for example, the centering (**Figures 3C,D,E,G**) foregrounding (**Figures 3B,D,E,G**) of plateware.
- *Detail*; for example, the performance of plenty in **Figure 3A** with its plateware, flatware and various accessories—cake stand, butter dish, milk jug, and teapot.
- *Size*; for example, the tightly cropped plateware and flatware in **Figure 3E**, bottom.
- *Texture*; for example the visualized textures of rims (**Figure 3B**), patterned edging (**Figure 3C**), grooves (**Figure 3E**) and the bubbled-glass plate of **Figure 3G** and ridged-glass glass of **Figure 3B**.

What is again striking about these highly produced, stock-quality images is their orderliness. In thinking about visualized textures, for example, we find either completely decontextualized, uncluttered settings (**Figures 3D,G**) or tableware backdropped by the smoothed, white surface of a tablecloth such as **Figures 3A–C** (with a just discernable ripple) and **Figure 3F**. The roughly textured surface of **Figure 3E** is itself in white and helps make salient the shine and smoothness of the flatware and plateware. In culinary arts, of course, white plates are strongly preferred for their contrastive capacity to make the food more salient; earlier, we also indicated that white plateware has been found to enhance the perception of flavor. In **Figure 3**, we see how the food is indeed made salient through its placement (e.g., the use of active space; cf. Thurlow, 2020b) and contrasting (e.g., brightly colored, textured and detailed ingredients on white plateware). Importantly, therefore, these images cohere—unified and made meaningful—through the combination of various *compositional meanings* (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; see also our discussion of **Figure 2** above) and in the context of enregistered practices within the field of culinary arts which is itself structured by its own fashions, trends and norms.

There are even wider cultural discourses and semiotic normativities at work in **Figure 3**. In this regard, we orient again to Thurlow and Jaworski’s (2010, 2012) earlier studies of “luxury landscapes;” in this work, they demonstrate how the textual or semiotic representation of orderliness maps onto and reinscribes ideologies of social order. In Thurlow and Jaworski’s terms, the extracts in **Figure 3** have in common their silence—literal and figurative—and their orderliness. In **Figures 3A,B**, for example, we see metonymic evidence of (White) people eating/drinking (i.e., the hands holding a teacup or water glass), but these are solitary figures not actually shown eating/drinking. Through their largely decontextualized settings, the remaining images in **Figure 3** similarly point to the idea of eating rather than the bustle of dining, the spoken exchanges of service, or even noisy act of eating itself. As with the luxury tourism advertisements analyzed in Thurlow and Jaworski (2010), these images produced silence through the combination of representational meanings like inactivity, stillness, “emptiness” and spaciousness, as well as through compositional meanings like color rhyming and whiteness. For Thurlow and Jaworski (ibid.), these kinds of micro-level social semiotic actions underscore aspirational ideologies of class status and privilege; we do not disagree. For our current purposes, however, we mostly want to highlight (a) how multimodal cohesion is produced in the texts themselves, but also (b) how multimodal coherence is dependent on a series of immediate and more far-reaching extratextual relations.

## Coherent Layering and Embedding

As we see it, and before we conclude, there are at least three layers of multimodal cohesion—intratextual connections—at work in the data we have chosen for our analysis. Within what we might characterize as the diegetic frame of the meal, a first layer of cohesion lies in the table setting—the often conventional arrangement of knives, forks, glasses, napkins, plates, etc. Here, multimodal ties are established through the material-cum-visual

design of the plateware (e.g., same substance, color or edge pattern) and flatware (e.g., same metal, shape, handle etching). Typically, we find a color-rhyming of tablecloths and napkins. Then, still within the diegetic frame, a second layer of cohesion occurs on the (main) plate itself where very careful attention is paid to the way the different ingredients or components of the dish are connected. We know from food design (aka culinary arts) that this is a fully multimodal production, depending on, for example, spatial arrangements, color-based information linking, height, textures and, of course, smells, and tastes. We then find cohesion at work also in the entextualized frame of the airlines' websites; here, a much more familiar kind of word-image cohesion is to be found, one which has interested us less in our analysis.

What certainly interests about these airline websites is that this is where we also see multimodal *coherence* emerging as a layered effect. First and foremost, for example, the tableware and meal “hang together” —and only really make sense—within the overall frame of airline marketing. In this sense, then, coherence emerges through the extratextual relations between one layer or frame and the next. So, for example, the dish—the food itself—is given meaning partly through its relation with the plateware and flatware. The meaning and value of the plate is, in turn, realized partly through the food that is put on it. Finally, of course, the meal does not quite make sense outside of the embodied actions of being served and of eating itself.

Ultimately, and as we explained earlier, coherence—multimodal or otherwise—may be produced through the effects of intratextual cohesion but it ultimately depends on extratextual relations (depending, of course, where one chooses to set the boundaries of “text”). This is why, as we say, the airline websites are essential in making the meal coherent as a performance of distinction and status. Furthermore, we have tried to demonstrate how coherence at this level can only really be achieved as a multimodal accomplishment—specifically, through the constant interplay of language and materiality. Most of the stuff (e.g., food) and things (e.g., knives and forks) of the premium meal are not inherently distinctive or prestigious: a tomato is a tomato, a plate is a plate. We must instead be told what makes them distinctive or prestigious. The tomato and plate are thus made coherent only through their transmodalization into words. But even this is not enough. The coherence of everything functions at another level—within an extra extratextual frame. The food, the meal, the table setting, the service, the eating, the online promotion (on websites or in passenger reviews) become fully significant only through their being embedded in the far wider field of contemporary class formations and, specifically, systems of privilege/inequality.

## CONCLUSION: SEMIOTIC ASSEMBLAGES AND/AS SOCIAL HIEROGLYPHICS

Only through understanding the mechanisms of intersemiotic translation ... can the heteroclitic group of artifacts that populate the world of gastronomy be recognized as a Coherent—and therefore effective—discourse; a discourse whose aim is to create a tasteful identity (Mangano, 2016: 341; emphasis ours).

Aside from Gwynne Mapes' (2021) analysis of the spatial staging of (elite) dining, Mangano (2016) is one of the few—if not the only—scholars working on the language/semiotics of food who engages directly with a properly multimodal approach. In this regard, we particularly appreciate his attention (quote above) to “intersemiotic translation” (which we would call *trandmodalization*) and to the wider semiotic field of foodways. It is no coincidence, we think, that Mangano also appeals to both discursive coherence and the Bourdieusean connection between gustatory taste with social taste (“tasteful identity”)<sup>9</sup>.

While the current paper is empirically focused on the minutiae and frippery of table settings, our critical objective is both wider and more substantial. Indeed, our underlying contention is that the symbolic economies of the “premium” airline meal are articulated into—and indeed dependent on—far-reaching political economies (see Thurlow, 2020a). As such, our analysis of things—from plates to knives to napkin rings—is grounded in Karl Marx's foundational ideas about commodity fetishism; as he explains:

Every useful thing ... is an assemblage of many properties, and may therefore be of use in various ways. ... It is value ... that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic (Marx, 1887, p. 2, 45)

Specifically, therefore, we rely on Marx's understanding that things or products exist as assemblages of different “properties” and values, and how these assemblages invariably conceal the social relations of labor, which otherwise make the things/products possible in the first place. It is this concealment which leads Marx to speak about the social hieroglyphics, which, in turn, explains why things/products need to be deciphered in order to understand their true economic and political ramifications. This perspective on things as hieroglyphic assemblages is essentially the one taken by social semiotics where talk, texts and practices are not treated as singular, monomodal accomplishments. Instead, any discursive action—eating a fancy airline meal, for example—is constituted through a range of different semiotic “properties,” all of which are networked into wider cultural and structural arrangements. This is precisely how discursive actions come to be constituted as integral and socially meaningful—in other words, as cohesive and coherent.

We demonstrate the point we are making by offering just one more different but related example: **Figure 4**, which is an extract from an advertisement for another airline's First- and Business-Class services. Notably, it is food services that are selected as the metonymic resource for promoting this airline's “premium” services.

This little commercial text is rendered cohesive through the connection drawn between the words and the images; the text is only made coherent and meaningful, however, as a semiotic assemblage which depends on a knowledge of—an ability to decipher—its cultural, historical, and institutional context.

<sup>9</sup>Although Mangano does not label or situate his work in terms of multimodality, this is effectively what the work is about; the difference is one of disciplinary framing rather than one of critical-empirical substance.



FIGURE 4 | Extract from an airline advertisement (airline #12).

In short, the text is a perfectly multimodal accomplishment underwritten by both symbolic economies and political economies. First there is language: “guests” rather than just “passengers” and then dining as opposed to mere eating. These rhetorics are then anchored visually through the juxtaposition of the catering hairnet/cap and the *toque blanche* or chef’s hat; these are clearly indexing the distinction between a mass-produced meal and something more restaurant-like. Indeed, a tall chef’s hat like this technically signals the seniority—and thus superiority—of the chef<sup>10</sup>.

As Cook and Crang (1996, p. 138) observe, food and food production are “a world where cultural lives and economic processes are characterized not only by the points in space where they take and make place, but also by the movements to, from and between those points.” More than this, eating inevitably also emerges as a geography of displacement. It is certainly no accident that Harvey (1990) keeps returning to the dinner table as the epitome of exploitative “consumption work” (cf. Foster, 2005, p. 11). Dining, says Harvey, is an “intricate geography” (p. 423) which sits at the intersection of social relations, politics, and morality; it is here where food as a commodity reaches back to “almost every niche of labor activity in the modern world” (p. 432). In this regard, Lin (2017) supply-chain analysis of airline catering helps put the “premium” meal in perspective. In mapping the complex technocratic logistics of the industry, Lin offers the following glimpses from his fieldwork at a large-scale catering facility: “two workers in an earmuffs-mandatory room oversaw sorting machines that deposited thousands of cutlery sets in metallic conveyors amid a cicada-like din, while another department hand-wrapped first and business class silverware in napkins” (p. 695). He then makes the point that it is this menial, behind-the-scenes work “that makes possible a “glamorous,” jet-setting lifestyle” (ibid.).

<sup>10</sup>For more information, see “A History of the Chef’s Hat” published by the Auguste Escoffier School of Culinary Arts: <https://www.escoffier.edu/blog/world-food-drink/a-history-of-the-chefs-hat/>.

In several ways, we see our analysis as a complement to Lin’s and to the broader critiques of other geographers like Harvey and Cook and Crang. To start, we are similarly concerned with food/eating as a site of social-cultural exchange. Like Lin, we also take the foodways of airplane travel as source of social injustice/inequality; while he is primarily concerned with the bigger-picture issues of supply chains, infrastructure, and economies of extraction, we approach things from the micro-level perspective of social semiotics. Ours is thus an approach which, analytically centered on the meal itself, is concerned with the seemingly banal, often unnoticed semiotic/communicative tactics by airline eating is promoted, staged, and enacted. The point we would make, however, is that we undertake such a bottom-up approach only because we too are keen to understand how these small-scale practices feed and sustain larger cultural-political systems of privilege/inequality.

Just as we seek to connect our analysis to these other disciplines and larger issues, we also see social semiotics contributing something special vis-à-vis discourse studies and sociocultural linguistics. One of the most significant moves that social semiotics makes, as part of its commitment to multimodality, is to lift analyses off the page, shifting attention from texts/images themselves to the wider social practices of which the texts are a part. As part of this, the conventional notion of text is expanded beyond the word-dominant genres of writing or speech; for social semioticians, “textualities” combine and play with the affordances of language as well as the multisensory possibilities of materials, colors, textures, sounds, smells, and so on. All of which is essential for making proper sense of a text as complex as a meal.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors without undue reservation.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

CT was responsible for the conception, design, theoretical basis of the study, produced the main analysis, and wrote the manuscript. NH generated and organized the dataset. Both authors performed the initial analysis together, contributed to the article revision, approval, and submission of the manuscript.

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