

'What Mrs Fisher knows about cooking' - On the titles of early American cookbooks

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ABSTRACT

The proposed article aims to examine the strategies used by American women cookbook writers to attract the intended audience to their collections. The study is based on 19th-century cookbooks published in the United States; earlier collections, although available in the US were published in and brought from Britain. Written for and, in many cases, by housewives, the analysed cookbooks show, on the one hand, how the authors tried to convince the prospective reader of their expertise and knowledge. On the other hand, a certain degree of intimacy with the reader was to draw the reader's attention to the collection. The discussion will be based on (i) the cookbooks' titles, as they are "the first point of contact between the writer and the potential reader" (Haggan, 2004, p. 193) and an important determinant of a book's success; and (ii) the authors' signatures (as not all of the publications were signed with the author's name).

Keywords: *American culinary collections; women writers; community cookbooks.*



I. INTRODUCTION

The present study concentrates on the titles of early cookbooks written by women in the US in the period from the end of the eighteenth until the beginning of the twentieth century. Earlier cooking collections were (a) published in Britain and brought to the colonies by the settlers, or (b) American reprints of the English compilations. Attention will be drawn to recipe collections authored by women, as cooking was an integral element of a woman's daily routine. Recipes were handed over from generation to generation, and mothers were expected to teach their daughters how to cook among other domestic skills. At that time writing down cooking instructions was also the basis for "women's social network as they shared their recipes" (Harbury, 1994, p. 116). Publishing cookbooks was a means of personal expression and became a starting point for entering the public sector, previously restricted to men.

Some of the early American cookbooks were conservative and included traditional recipes which usually indicated the status of the household; others were much more innovative and their authors were "exploring new possibilities and stretching [their] boundaries as well as upholding old traditions" (Harbury, 1994, p. 13), which often involved merging new recipes with the old ones. An example of the latter type was promoted by Jane Randolph, who frequently incorporated some Native American foodstuffs, e.g., persimmon, into her recipes.

The first American cookbook, authored by Amelia Simmons, was published in 1796. The author, allegedly a professional cook herself, aimed to improve life of "the rising generation of Females in America" (Elias, 2017, p. 17). Her collection differed from the ones previously published as they had been modelled on the English collections, whereas her *American Cookery* contained instructions how to incorporate originally American ingredients. Simmons's publication, which aimed at the newly emerged middle class, initiated certain trends in kitchen guidance. She opened the door for women to step out and share their experience with others.

Following Elias (2017), before the Civil War approximately 265 books with recipes were published. These were not necessarily cookbooks, but any works related to the household which, among others, contained instructions on food preparation. Not only English but also French, Spanish and German collections were published in North America (first in 1840, 1845 and 1848, respectively). After the Civil War the expansion of the publishing industry contributed to diversification of American cookbooks. They were modelled on the volumes produced before the war but additionally a number of new themes, such as southern identity, community or progressivism, were introduced. The pre-war collections took the form of household manuals, often organised around foodstuffs, in which, next to the instructions how to prepare soups or pies, there might have been recipes for cologne or dish soap. With time, cookbooks became more widespread and easily available to a more diverse audience. Many cookbooks emphasised regional and cultural identity, for instance by introducing essays which placed the instructions in a specific cultural or regional context. The middle of the 19th century brought a series of transformations in terms of the style of the cooking collections. One of the new developments were community cookbooks. Compiled collectively by women living in towns or belonging to clubs or congregations, these collections were distributed locally for charity purposes (Kelly, 2012).

The discussion will be confined to titles of the early American cooking collections. The title, being one of the elements of the paratext, as Genette (1991) called it, is the first piece of information that a reader sees, and as such, contributes to the way the book is perceived by the public. Soler (2007, p. 151) claims that titles represent “the doors between readers and the content of the papers to which they belong”. Following Haggan (2004), they are like advertisements, which often influence a reader’s choice whether to get interested in the publication or not. Langdon-Neuner (2007) distinguishes two major types of titles: descriptive and informative. The former give some details related to the content of the collection and indicate the purpose of the publication. The latter point to certain results or conclusions which may be drawn from the book. In terms of the title structure, Genette (1988) distinguishes simple and complex titles. The former refer to a common title of a collection, the latter mention

individual elements which constitute the collection. Soler (2007) divides titles from the point of view of the grammatical structures used, and distinguishes nominal, compound, full-length and question titles. Nominal titles consist of a noun phrase. Compound titles are composed of (at least) two nominal phrases (or non-clausal elements) joined with a punctuation mark, such as a colon, full stop or a dash. Full-length titles take the form of clauses, whereas question titles are interrogative structures (Haggan, 2004; Soler, 2007).

When it comes to the functions of titles, Grivel (1973) distinguishes three major ones, by defining a title as “A series of linguistic signs which can appear at the head of a text to designate it, to indicate its general content and to appeal to the public aimed at” (Genette, 1988, p. 708). Looking closer at the cookbook titles, we may conclude that on the one hand, by focusing on the readers’ expectations, knowledge and interests, titles are supposed to attract a potential reader to choose the particular collection - in which case the reader’s needs influence the writer’s choices. On the other hand, the cookbook writers try to convince potential readers that their cookbook is something more than only a set of ordinary recipes and the authors possess a certain degree of culinary expertise. Such an approach focuses on the writer who projects certain roles on to the readers and tries to influence their behaviour and reactions (Thompson & Thetela, 1995).

This leads us to the discussion of writer- and reader-oriented features of a text, reviewed, for instance, by Hyland (2005), who divided textual interaction features into stance and engagement, respectively. The former may take the form of hedges and boosters, which express certainty or doubts, as well as attitudinal markers and self-mentions, which correspond to personal attitudes. Gray and Biber (2012, p. 15) define stance as “the ways in which speakers and writers encode opinions and assessments in the language they produce”, bringing a required effect on the reader. They illustrate these ways as a continuum of evaluative meaning which varies with respect to two parameters: (1) the meaning of the assessment, which ranges from personal feelings and attitudes (> attitudinal stance) to a status of knowledge (> epistemic stance), and (2) the linguistic level used for the assessment, which goes from lexis to grammar, and

comprises explicit and implicit stance markers. Hyland's (2005) engagement - or voice, as he calls it in his later studies (2012) - entitles the writer to speak as a community member. It allows the writer, among others, to include readers and guide them to particular interpretations or conclusions. Engagement may be introduced through reader mentions, directives, questions, knowledge references and personal asides.

II. THE CORPUS

The aim of the paper is to examine what textual strategies were employed by women authors of the early American culinary collections in order to attract a potential reader. Attention will be drawn to such aspects as: (i) references to the reader; (ii) references to the author; (iii) regional references; and (iv) references to the text type. Next, these references will be discussed with respect to stance and engagement in order to illustrate the ways writers encode their attitudes and assessments in the titles. Additionally, the structure of the selected titles will be reviewed.

The corpus consists of two parts. The first one contains "standard" cookbooks (henceforth referred to as SC), that is collections compiled (usually) by a single author. These have been extracted from two online repositories: (a) *Feeding America: The Historic American Cookbook Project* and (b) *Savouring the Past*, as well as from Lincoln's (1929) *Bibliography of American Cookery Books 1742-1860*. The second part of the corpus consists of community cookbooks (henceforth referred to as CC), which are collective pieces of work that, as stated by Kelly (2012, p. 31), "are a unique genre", and thus, should be separated from "standard cookbooks". They are hardly ever signed by a single author; instead, the authorship is assigned to the ladies of a certain congregation. The database of community cookbooks (CC) comes from the archives of the Library of Congress.

Altogether, 92 collections representing the former category (SC) were selected for the analysis. All of them were published in North America and authored by women. Compendia not signed, or signed in such a way that the author's sex could not be

deciphered - e.g., with initials or with phrases, such as “by a farmer” - were excluded from the study. The latter category (CC) comprises 76 compilations. Additionally, since many of the early American collections were published under slightly modified titles, such duplicates were eliminated. As a consequence, titles such as the ones exemplified under (1)-(2) have been counted only once.

(1a) *The Carolina housewife, or house and home: by a lady of Charleston.*

(1b) *House and home; or, the Carolina housewife. By a lady of Charleston.*

[Third edition, corrected and enlarged.]

(2a) *The orphan’s friend and housekeeper’s assistant is composed upon temperance principles, with instructions in the art of making plain and fancy cakes, puddings, pastry, confectionery, ice creams, jellies, blanc mange, also for the cooking of all the various kinds of meat and vegetables. With a variety of useful information and receipts never before published. By an old housekeeper. Please to examine.*

(2b) *The housekeeper’s assistant, composed upon temperance principles: with instructions in the art of making plain and fancy cakes, puddings, pastry, confectionery, ice creams, jellies, blanc mange, also for the cooking of all the various kinds of meats and vegetables; with a variety of useful information and receipts never before published. By an old housekeeper.*

III. DISCUSSION

Following Notaker (2017, p. 62), from the 18th century on, cookbooks instead of being memory aids became “a fashion within the upper classes”. It is argued that the two types of cooking collections, that is “standard” and community cookbooks, were compiled for different purposes. The former were published, among others, for didactic purposes, as “American women’s skill in the kitchen was supposed to grow from the newlywed’s stumbling incompetence to the seasoned housekeeper’s

expertise" (Elias, 2017, p. 23); whilst the latter were published "in support of projects ranging from libraries and free kindergartens to steeples and church carpeting" (Kelly 2012, p. 31). Thus, the two subtypes will be discussed separately and compared in terms of the information included in their titles.

III.1. Structure of the titles

The titles of the standard collections are usually complex and descriptive, as they tend to enumerate the type of dishes or the foodstuffs which the recipes deal with (3). They show a tendency towards a nominal or compound structure, as in (4)-(5); however, as shown in the title of this paper, instances of question titles have also been found (6).

(3) *New American cookery, or female companion. Containing, full and ample directions for roasting, broiling, stewing, hashing, boiling, preserving, pickling, potting, fricasees, soups, puff-pastes, puddings, custards, pies, tarts, &c. Also, the making of wines and cheese. Peculiarly adapted to the American mode of cooking.*

(4a) *Breakfast, luncheon and tea.*

(4b) *Miss Leslie's new cookery book.*

(5a) *The Virginia housewife: or, Methodical cook book.*

(5b) *Domestic duties; or, instructions to young married ladies, on the management of their households, and the regulations of their conduct in the various relations and duties of married life.*

(6) *What Mrs. Fisher knows about Old Southern Cooking, soups, pickles, preserves, etc.*

In the other type of cookbooks (CC), much shorter titles are preferred. They hardly ever indicate the content of the compendium, instead, they take the form of simple titles, as in (7); similarly to the SCs, nominal (see (7)) and compound titles prevail (8).

(7a) Gems For the Kitchen.

(7b) The Illinois Cook Book.

(8a) Our Cooks in Council: a manual of practical and economical recipes for the household.

(8b) Cooks in Clover: reliable recipes compiled by the ladies of the North Reformed Church, Passaic, New Jersey.

III.2. References to the reader

As Notaker (2017, p. 55) noticed, “the writer who records the recipe, if he is not documenting it only as a personal aide-memoire, must position himself in relation to another addressee, not a pupil or a daughter by his or her side, but rather a reader or readers, who are invisible to the writer.” Additionally, Elias (2017, p. 24) described a typical (American) cookbook buyer as a reader not a cook, who was “a woman of the urban or small-town middle class, a person unlikely to be found stirring pots or stoking fires to feed her family. She might enter the kitchen on the cook’s night out, or to prepare special treats for family occasions, but she was usually only responsible for choosing her family’s menu, not for making her choices edible.”

The titles of the analysed standard cookbooks confirm that they were aimed mostly at housewives and ladies in general (see (9)), but also specifically at particular groups of females, such as: young ladies (10), married women, and also (although rarely) at experienced and skilful female cooks (11). Additionally, some collections were addressed to farmers or people with certain disabilities who required a special diet (12).

(9a) “Aunt Babette’s” cook book. Foreign and domestic receipts for the household. A valuable collection of receipts and hints **for the housewife**, many of which are not to be found elsewhere.

(9b) New American cookery, or **female companion**. Containing, full and ample directions for roasting, broiling, stewing, hashing, boiling, preserving, pickling,

potting, fricasees, soups, puff-pastes, puddings, custards, pies, tarts, &c. Also, the making of wines and cheese. Peculiarly adapted to the American mode of cooking.

(10) Domestic cookery, useful receipts, and hints **to young housekeepers**. By Elisabeth E. Lea.

(11) **The skilful housewife's book**: or complete guide to domestic cookery, taste, comfort and economy. Embracing 659 receipts, pertaining to household duties, the care of health, gardening, flowers, birds, education of children, etc., etc. By Mrs. L. G. Abell. Author of "Gems by the wayside," "Woman in her various relations," etc. With valuable additions, by an English housekeeper.

(12) A manual of homoeopathic cookery, designed chiefly **for the use of such persons as are under homoeopathic treatment**. By the wife of a homoeopathic physician. With additions, by the wife of an American homoeopathic physician.

Some of the titles (SC) point to the application of the recipes included in the collection, as being aimed at families of various size and at various locations (see (13)). The principles of abstinence from alcohol might have been mentioned to attract the exact group of readers, as in (14). Additionally, the reader (or the potential cook) was often supposed to be frugal (15).

(13a) Mrs. Hale's new cook book. A practical system **for private families in town and country**; with directions for carving, and arranging the table for parties, etc. Also, preparations of food for invalids and for children, by Mrs. Sarah J. Hale. Illustrated with numerous engravings.

(13b) The lady's receipt-book; a useful companion **for large or small families**. A sequel to her former work on domestic cookery; comprising new and approved directions for preparing soups, fish, meats, vegetables, poultry, game, pies,

puddings, cakes, confectionary, sweetmeats, jellies, &c. Also, a list of dishes for breakfast, dinner, and supper tables.

(14) The orphan's friend and housekeeper's assistant is **composed upon temperance principles**, [...]

(15a) The American home cook book, with several hundred excellent recipes, selected and tried with great care, and with a view to be sued by **those who regard economy**, and containing important information on the arrangement and well ordering of the kitchen. The whole based on many years of experience. By an American lady. Illustrated with engravings.

(15b) The American **economical housekeeper**, and family receipt book.

Such a variety of target audience cannot be found in the other group of cookbooks. The CC titles hardly ever indicate the potential reader. In the entire corpus, only two such references were found: to housekeepers (16a) and people who like good food (16b). Even though collections of this type were aimed neither at very rich nor particularly poor members of the society, with the exception of one reference (17), there are no indications of the financial status of the potential cookbook user.

(16a) The Pentucket Housewife: a manual for **housekeepers**, and collection of recipes, contributed by the Ladies of the First Baptist Church, Haverhill, Massachusetts by Carrie W. Train, editor

(16b) Our Chef's Best Receipts; a practical cook book **for people who like good things to eat**.

(17) Our Cooks in Council: a manual of practical and **economical recipes** for the household by the Ladies of the Congregational Church, Jefferson, Ohio.

III.3. References to the author

Unlike references to the reader, which were found mostly in the SCs, the author's presence is highly visible in the titles of both types of collections. In the community cookbooks the authors are indicated in every single title. As the recipes were published collectively by a group of women, the references usually indicate a particular congregation, sometimes pointing to the chief editor of the project, see (18).

(18a) Indianapolis Cook Book **by the Ladies of the Pattison Methodist Episcopal Church.**

(18b) The Erie Cook Book containing a large collection of recipes for domestic cookery, cooking for the sick, care of wardrobe, laundry and house plants, bills of fare for public and private parties, **compiled and arranged by Laura C. Sterrett.**

The standard collections were mostly composed by ladies or housekeepers, who, in order to convince a potential reader to choose a particular collection and emphasise the high quality of the recipes included, tend to point to their previous publications, their long experience in cooking, or they evoke other experts supposedly known to the general public (see (19)). The community collections, on the other hand, tend to familiarise the authors of the recipes. These titles suggest that such dishes as presented in the collections were eaten by ordinary and practical housewives who selected and tried the recipes themselves (20). The author often identifies herself with the readers, she presents herself as their equal, and the recipes are not supposed to teach the reader how to cook but rather to give ideas how to improve or innovate the well-known dishes (21).

(19a) The American housewife: containing the most valuable and original receipts in all the various branches of cookery; and written in a minute and methodical manner. Together with a collection of miscellaneous receipts, and directions relative to housewifery. **By an experienced lady.** Also, the whole art of carving, illustrated by sixteen engravings.

(19b) The new household receipt-book: containing maxims, directions, and specifics for promoting health, comfort, and improvement in the homes of the people. **Compiled from the best authorities**, with many receipts never before collected. **By Sarah Josepha Hale, author of “Northwood,” “Woman’s record,” “The new book of cooker,” etc.**

(19c) The American home cook book, with several hundred excellent recipes, selected and tried with great care, and with a view to be sued by those who regard economy, and containing important information on the arrangement and well ordering of the kitchen. The whole **based on many years of experience**. By an American lady. Illustrated with engravings.

(20a) The Hatfield Cook Book: **plain and fancy recipes by the “real folks” of the Congregational Church**, Hatfield, Massachusetts.

(20b) **Recipes Tried and True by the Ladies’ Aid Society**, First Presbyterian Church, Marion OH.

(21) **Our Receipt Book** by Mrs. John Henry Rolfe, comp. for The Improvement Society of the Second Reformed Church, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

III.4. Regional references

Both types of collections are full of geographical references. The standard cookbooks frequently refer to America in general, to one of the states or to a particular city (see (22)); whereas the community collections, apart from state references, often mention the local community within which the collection was collated (23).

(22a) **American** domestic cookery, formed on principles of economy, for the use of private families. [...]

(22b) The **Carolina** housewife, or house and home: by a lady of Charleston.

(22c) Mrs. Lincoln’s **Boston** cook book. What to do and what not to do in cooking.

(23a) **Grand Rapids** receipt book, compiled by The ladies of the congregational church, for the ladies fair, held at Luce's hall May 15th, 16th, and 17th, 1871.

(23b) **Mohawk Valley** Cook Book by the Ladies' Society, St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Canajoharie, New York.

These references prove of the growing national consciousness of the inhabitants of North America. They might have been also incorporated as some commercial strategy to encourage potential buyers, as "[u]sing the name of a region or a city in a cookbook's title certainly made it especially interesting to people in that area" (Notaker, 2017, p. 249). However, the locations mentioned in the titles may not always be trusted as true places of origin of the recipes. Despite assigning a collection to a particular territory, the recipes included derive from various locations. For instance, Randolph's *The Virginia housewife: or, Methodical cook book* contains instructions how to prepare polenta or ropa vieja (Elias, 2017); the former being a traditional Italian, the latter a Spanish or Cuban dish (Davidson, 2006).

III.5. References to the text type

The cooking recipe, being defined by Görlach (2004, p. 68) as a "statement on ingredients required", is a text type with a well-defined function, i.e., to instruct on how to prepare a dish (2004, p. 123). The instructional or educational function is often indicated in the titles to the "standard" collections. Their authors indicate that they present readers with a compendious repository, a complete instructor, a manual, a useful companion, or a guide, see (24). The writers tend to imply scientific character of their collection by calling it an encyclopaedia, a directory, a dictionary, or a treatise (as in (25)). The recipes are referred to as hints, directions, advice, or instructions. The motif of novelty and originality of the recipes is repeatedly promoted (see (26)). As Notaker (2017, p. 83) suggested, offering new dishes gave the impression of luxury, which put the author in a superior position to the readers who imitated the recipes.

The titles to the community collections hardly ever make such references, and if so, they relate to manuals only, i.e., a text type which, following Görlach (2004, p. 55),

represents “a small book of handy use”; thus, no attempts to make an impression that the publication represents a scientific text type were made.

(24a) The universal receipt book; being a **compendious repository of practical information in cookery**, preserving, pickling, distilling, and all the branches of domestic economy. To which is added, some advice to farmers. Second edition with great additions.

(24b) Miss Parloa’s new cook book, a **guide** to marketing and cooking.

(25a) The practical housekeeper; a **cyclopædia** of domestic economy embracing [...] the table and attendance, the art of cookery, receipts under forty-five heads [...]

(25b) Science in the kitchen. A **scientific treatise** on food substances and their dietetic properties, together with a practical explanation of the principles of healthful cookery, and a large number of original, palatable, and wholesome recipes.

(26a) The cook’s own book, and housekeeper’s register; comprehending all valuable receipts for cooking meat, fish and fowl; and composing every kind of soup, gravy, pastry, preserves, essences, &c. that have been published or invented during the last twenty years. With **numerous original receipts**, and a complete system of confectionery. [...]

(26b) Mrs. Ellis’s housekeeping made easy; or, complete instructor in all branches of cookery and domestic economy, **containing the most modern and approved receipts** of daily service in all families. Stereotype edition. Revised and adapted to the wants of the ladies in the United States, by an American lady.

III.6. Stance and engagement

As explained earlier, stance refers to the ways in which the writers express their personal attitudes or judgements and evaluate knowledge. The former are revealed by various attitudinal markers, the latter by hedges and boosters (cf. Hyland, 2005). Titles,

being paratexts rather than complete texts, have a limited range of stance markers, which may be characterised as “rhetorical choices which allow authors to (...) balance claims for the significance, originality and plausibility of their work” (Hyland & Jiang, 2019, p. 131), and which, as a result, help persuade the readers to purchase the cookbook.

The analysis shows that the majority of stance markers found in the titles are attitude markers represented through value-laden lexis, which - as Gray & Biber (2015) claim - are common irrespective of register. The cookbook authors assess their collections to be, among others, *the best, complete, good, great, excellent* or *valuable*; the instructions, whenever referred to in the title, are *practical, original, reliable, the most exact* and *useful*; whereas the dishes are described as *perfectly boiled, wholesome* or *fancy*.

Neither traces of epistemic stance markers (i.e. hedges and boosters), nor first person references to the author have been found. The writer is usually introduced with the third person reference, e.g., *Miss Leslie's complete cookery* or *Mrs. Putnam receipt book*.

The number of stance options at a writer's disposal is limited and depends on the writer's understanding of the community. In the analysed corpus, most of the attitudinal markers were found in the “standard” collections, whereas in the community collections their authors refrained from personal evaluation. As the books were aimed at and distributed among local communities in order to support a common cause, the value of the recipes might have been of minor importance.

Yet, the CC authors seem to “acknowledge and connect to others, recognising the presence of their readers, (...) guiding them to interpretations” (Hyland, 2005, p. 176). As most of the analysed community collections supported a religious cause, their authors might have adopted the attitude of modesty and, not only put themselves on an equal footing with the readers (as in *Our Receipt Book*), but also engaged the potential readers by referring to shared knowledge or pointing to certain authorities who contributed to or approved of the instructions. These are usually general

referents, such as *the guild house committee, experienced/skilled housekeepers, woman's wisdom*, or even *Our Chef* (= God). Similar references found in the SCs praise the author herself as an esteemed cookbook writer and an experienced housewife.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The early American cookbooks written by women were aimed at women. As noted by Notaker (2017, p. 134), it is absolutely necessary for the title of a cookbook to inform about the content of the book. As illustrated above, the titles of the analysed standard collections often went beyond that and not only indicated the content, but also pointed to the author and her qualifications, to the target audience as well as to the properties of cooking on the basis of the proposed recipes. This might be accounted for by the fact that, as the number of collections was increasing, the authors had to use a variety of strategies to catch a potential buyer's attention. They did so by:

- (i) convincing her of the writer's expertise, which was achieved either by praising one's knowledge, indicating a well-known authority or suggesting a scientific character of the collection;
- (ii) declaring the originality and modernity of the instructions;
- (iii) invoking national or regional feelings;
- (iv) addressing a specific group of potential readers.

On the other hand, in the community collections the authors tried to evoke some intimacy between themselves and the readers; they were presented as members of a local community, women "like us", who shared instructions for dishes they had served at homes for their own families. They hardly ever indicated the intended audience, as their collections were directed at anyone interested or fond of supporting a particular charity aim. Being distributed locally, the collections were not intended as scientific sources but as handbooks for everyday use.

Despite the fact that standard cookbooks and community collections were published for different purposes, this seems not to have influenced the structure of their titles significantly. On the one hand, titles given to the SCs are mostly descriptive and, as a result, longer and complex; whereas titles of the CCs usually do not give details related to the content of the collection. But on the other hand, regardless of the type of a collection, nominal and compound titles were chosen by the authors.

Notes

ⁱ The first cookbook printed in North America was an edition of the English *The Compleat Housewife* published in 1742, followed by publication of other English collections (Lincoln, 1929; Notaker, 2017).

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