

Overbaked & Underproofed:

An interactive exploration of the judging language in the Great British Baking Show

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Abstract

Overbaked and Underproofed: An interactive exploration of the judging language in the Great British Baking Show (GBBS), seeks to create and provide a platform that fosters a critical engagement with an aspect of language as used in a popular reality TV phenomenon.

By extracting and analyzing the vocabulary and language usage in the judging segments of two seasons of *GBBS*, the project intends to probe the perceived paucity of evaluative language and then look at what the results might reveal about our culture's easy relationship with quick judgment. A comparison corpus from an American cooking show will further help clarify the particularities of evaluative language in the context of food judging competitions.

Via a website for engaged fans of *GBBS* (primarily) as well as interested linguists and academics, the project features visualizations of the analyzed judging language corpora, academic discourse around the method and findings of the project, as well as interactive games like trivia and a Judge-this-bake Bingo (populated with the most frequently used judgment expressions). *Overbaked & Underproofed* aims to playfully induce a shift in popular media consumption by bringing consciousness to the use of evaluative expressions and the often unarticulated frameworks of judgment, ultimately producing a new and expanded literacy.

List of Participants*

Maria Baker: Primary Project Management; Game Design

Teddy Manning: Corpora Creation, Data Management & Text Analysis; Social Media Outreach

Ruby Chu: Data Visualization & Webdesign, Visual and structural integration of content

Nuraly Soltonbekov: Research and Outreach Strategist

* for more detailed task descriptions, see STAFF/ROLES

Narrative

Overbaked & Underproofed proposes to look closely at the language used in the judging segments of *The Great British Baking Show (GBBS)*. *GBBS* is a reality TV baking competition that has been on-air for more than a decade and has been one of the most-streamed original tv-shows in the US during the pandemic. As the only reality TV show in the top 15, it placed third in the “original content” category, only surpassed by scripted shows, *Lucifer* and *Squid Game*, in 2021. *GBBS* has accumulated more than 13 billion viewing minutes on streaming platforms in 2021.

GBBS, The Great British Baking Show, as it is known in the US (in Britain, it is known as *The Great British Bake-Off*), has produced 13 seasons and various holiday-themed specials since its inception in 2010. It distinguishes itself from other reality shows in a number of ways: E.g., it is about finding GB's most skilled amateur baker, and the show's focus is on the "bakes" the contestants produce and not on their interpersonal intrigues. There is no (deliberate) scheming, and there are no alliances between contestants that result in calculated expulsions. The show's most defining and comforting feature is in fact a subversion of the going reality competition mantra "I'm not here to make friends." Contestants of *GBBS* absolutely seem to be there to make friends and help each other through the pressure of the baking challenges.

Nonetheless, it is a competition. One baker must win, and others must be ranked. Judging, under these circumstances, plays an unusual role. Judging is essential to keeping the suspense created by competition alive. The necessary judgment is supplied by two bonafide British experts, the blunt and no-nonsense Paul Hollywood (a British celebrity chef) and Prue Leith (a multi-talented restaurateur, chef, and writer). Every episode gives the judges three

opportunities to evaluate bakes. They judge the baker's "signature bake," the "technical challenge," and the "showstopper." In the show, the "signature bake" and the "showstopper" challenges are often introduced via brief segments that feature drawings/renderings of the planned bake along with short stories of the bakers' motivations behind choosing to create this particular bake. The scripted text that support these visual renderings is narrated by one of the hosts in a lilting, appetite-inducing voice. These almost tender previews suggest that the show's creators know that, in a screen-mediated context, the totality of a bake (taste and all) is transmitted by language as well as visual clues.

In contrast to the preview, the judging portions seem gruff and linguistically anemic. The judges swiftly move from bake to bake, taste a bite, and immediately pronounce a verdict along a limited list of expressions, including a few binary options: "Over-baked," "under-proofed," or vice-versa, "the flavor comes through," or "doesn't come through," et cetera. These fundamentals are at times complemented by a few choice descriptors: "soggy bottom" and "stodgy" (bad), "fantastic" (good), and, when a contestant's bake reaches the superlative, language seems to drop out entirely and is replaced by a silent "Paul Hollywood Handshake." (Which is immediately verbalized by a host as "they got the Paul Hollywood Handshake!") *Overbaked & Undreproofed (Ob&Up)* is named for two of the more common words used by the judges when critiquing the "bakes," and these two words might already represent 10% of the limited judging vocabulary in use.

But how accurate is this rendering?

Is there perhaps overlooked additional vocabulary, or are there sentence constructions and grammatical maneuvers that replace the work of a diverse vocabulary but escape first

impressions? How exactly does language work in these judging segments? And what does language analysis reveal about the use of evaluative language in our culture? In order to probe whether the suspicion holds and what a more thorough look at the language of judgment might reveal, *Ob&Up* plans to work with three distinct corpora:

The anchor corpus and point of departure will be Season 12 (which aired during the pandemic, the season described in the opening paragraph). The judging segments of Season 12 will serve as the basis for initial searches and assertions about the size and variety of judging language and vocabulary.

Additional insight will be gained by comparing the anchor corpus to the *GBBS* comparison corpus of Season 2. The comparison should yield findings around how and whether the vocabulary has contracted or expanded over the course of a decade, what markers remained, and what unique features each corpus shows. It might help define individual judges' proclivities and their commonalities.

And finally, to further explore the language used within *GBBS*, we must also understand the wider TV- genre context within which *GBBS* exists. A second comparison corpus from another food-focused show, *Hells Kitchen*, will offer findings on cultural nuances and genre differences within the various corpora of judging language on TV. The introduction of *Hell's Kitchen* will also open new directions for research: At the height of *GBBS*' popularity, Internet users across platforms joked that British cooking shows were much calmer than their American counterparts. But to what extent is this verifiable on a linguistic level? Is Gordon Ramsay skewing the data by being an angry British chef on American shows? Are Mary Berry and Prue Leith just too nice? Perhaps it is this perception of British cooking shows being kinder that created such a strong community of fans surrounding *GBBS*.

To find answers to these questions, the analysis of the corpora will be conducted using NLTK in Python for sentiment analysis, Java Graphical Authorship Attribution Program (JGAAP) for authorship attribution and demographic identification, and finally, Voyant and Wordtree for a variety of ad hoc tasks such as word occurrence. The results from this analysis, as well as the texts themselves, will be made available in a corpus via a GitHub repository.

Finally, the results will be consolidated and visually represented on a publicly accessible website. In its presentation, *Ob&Up* wants to mix an academic approach with a playful one. While the final design and layout of the website will depend on our findings, "*To See or Not to See*" – an Interactive Tool for the Visualization and Analysis of Shakespeare Plays by Thomas Wilhelm, Manuel Burghardt, and Christian Wolff can serve as a partial reference. This project's visualization and interactive features let users easily grasp the structure of a Shakespeare play at a glance/on one screen. Its interface facilitates an exploration of connections between speakers (characters' relationships), between temporal points (the arc and progression of the plot), and also, by zooming in, between particular verbal expressions (who uses what words in what context). *To See or Not to See* provides the opportunity to toggle between a bird's view and a frog's view, distant and close reading, which is a maneuver *Ob&Up* seeks to conceptually replicate.

One additional reason a project built on the texts of Shakespeare's plays can serve as conceptual inspiration for *Ob&Up* is precisely that it deals with recognized classic works of drama/literature. *Ob&Up*'s main intention is to position the language within an object of popular culture as a kind of literature. The project aims to entice the site's users to engage with and

question *GBBS*'s language in a way usually reserved for works of (capital L) Literature: as language worthy of conscious and close attention. We can regard *GBBS*'s "Judging English" as its own small linguistic universe.

What linguistic universes such as *GBBS* Judging English tell us about the priorities of our society and its values is at the core of cultural criticism's curiosity. Where these kinds of languages filter into mainstream language-use is *also* where a wider public's curiosity meets academic interests. This is to say, the target audience for this project is two-fold. Any fans of *GBBS* who have shared memes or caught themselves pronouncing a random piece of pastry "stodgy" in a (perhaps fake) British accent will find *Ob&Up* intriguing, as will linguistics and other linguistically interested academics in media studies and beyond. Existing language-focused engagement in the public domain — via word games and puzzles, language-usage quizzes, and word-of-the-year announcements — shows that the channels of communication between the media-consuming public and language experts are naturally present. *Ob&Up* plans to consciously use and build on overlaps between playful engagement with language and academic research by connecting these two differently motivated curiosities in new ways.

In addition to the visualization of the corpus, *Ob&Up* plans to centrally feature interactive game components: A trivia game will repackaging some of our most intriguing findings as *GBBS* trivia questions. Another possibility would be a "judgment generator" tool (modeled on name-generator tools) which suggests new judgments as remixes and combinations derived exclusively from the *GBBS* corpora. A third plan is focused on developing a Re/watch-party Bingo

Game. A digital Bingo card prefilled with prevalent judging vocabulary can be used to play while watching re-runs or new episodes of *GBBS*. The “Judge-this-Bake” Bingo would be a twist on and an extension of the *GBBS* printable bingo card offered by PBS when *GBBS* aired on the public channel. While the PBS Bingo card used stable structural elements (actions) of a typical *GBBS* episode as suggestions for its squares, *Ob&Up*’s Bingo will focus exclusively on the vocabulary used during the judging subsegments. [Below, a preliminary simple Bingo card to illustrate the idea and its application in the project's context.]

JUDGE THIS BAKE		
BINGO		
<i>Overbaked</i>	<i>Under-proved</i>	<i>Soggy Bottom</i>
<i>Flavor is coming through</i>		<i>Underbaked</i>
<i>Over-proved</i>	<i>Flavor is not coming through</i>	<i>Under-proved</i>

The ubiquitous cultural presence and popularity of *GBBS* (in the genre of food competitions), the defined scope of the linguistic universe, and the inclusion of games make an extension of *Ob&Up* into social media a logical component of the project. *Ob&Up* plans to connect with existing and active fan communities of the show, and the project team will reach out to potential stakeholders via Reddit, Facebook, and Instagram (and other relevant platforms) to facilitate fans’ discovery of the website. "Judge this Bake" word-of-the-day prompts and etymological explorations, and linguistic facts could all continue the dialogue around evaluative

language and its role on social media. Once fans of *GBBS* participate in a meta-discourse on evaluative language and reflexive judgment (either explicitly or by playing the language games), the project's main goal is accomplished.

Environmental Scan/DH Context

Ob&Up is positioned at the intersection of various sub-disciplines of the Digital Humanities. This positioning alone invites novel combinations and remixes of existing methods and project precedents. The sub-disciplines mentioned above include archiving (specifically food-related and film/tv-related), literary text analysis/working with corpora, and data visualization. Meaning while many previous DH projects *either* create an archive and interpret it, *or* visualize a corpus (like the already mentioned Shakespeare project), *or* use distant reading to produce literary analysis, combining these activities is not a prevalent M.O.

When searching for DH projects that might align with *Ob&Up* in the area of television and food culture, it becomes evident that current projects focus primarily on creating archives. In the realm of food, this translates to a focus on collecting and archiving recipes and perhaps tying them to specific regions and periods. *What America Ate* is an example that uses an archive of 1930 recipes and contextual information to create a multifaceted look at a historical period. Text analysis is not part of the project's goal.

An endeavor that does dive into linguistic aspects of food works with an unusual corpus extracted from menus. *Linguistic Markers of Status in Food Culture: Bourdieu's Distinction in a Menu Corpus* compares and analyzes language use on menus of restaurants in various price classes. However, the results are presented as a traditional academic paper. It does include visualizations as infographics but generally follows academic literary conventions. In this way, *Linguistic Markers of Status in Food Culture* seems representative of the prevalent methods

when it comes to DH projects that employ distant reading methods in linguistic contexts intending to produce literary cultural criticism. Consequently, the focus seems to be EITHER on creating interactive visualization OR on interpreting aspects through distant reading, whereby the visualization created by distant reading tools is secondary.

Media like television and radio aren't currently used to extract corpora and more often serve as an impetus to create archives and collect metadata. Interpretations of meta-data can then help develop a lens to, for example, measure inequities and imbalances in the film industry. Similar quantitative analyses to probe inequities are performed when a film's screenplay becomes a corpus. E.g., tagging film dialogue by speaker can let viewers see who gets more dialogue, *Disney Screenplay Dialog. Broken Down by Gender* by Hanah Anderson and Matt Daniels is one example that examines the gender-im/balances by dialogue quantity in over 200 scripts. Word count and metadata provide evidence for their argument, and their work is unquestionably important. However, further nuances within the actual spoken dialogue in television and movie corpora are not detailed and, generally, seem not to be the object of DH research.

In regards to TV, specifically, there is, again, a prevalence of projects that use meta-data and archiving practices. A project on *Televisual Time* that analyzes TV Guide stands out as a TV-centric DH project. "Televisual Time asks what a digital, distant reading of T.V. Guide might tell us about the medium of television and, particularly, its way of structuring time." The investigation focuses on distant reading and the associated larger and structural discoveries.

Close reading and distant reading rarely co-exist (they do, occasionally, in text analysis, see Richard Jean So and Edwin Roland "Race and Distant Reading", which use a metadata analysis as an inspiration to ask questions that invite close reading) and, as mentioned, do not seem to co-exist for corpora extracted from television.

And, finally, looking at evaluative language as a subject of academic investigation, the *Journal of Cultural Analytics* promises —via “a very short introduction”— a special issue on “Cultures of E/valuation on the Social Web.” The work in the issue will analyze various discourses “including reviews of non-literary ‘products’ such as cooking recipes, restaurant reviews, and concerts.” There is no indication of how the data and results will be presented, but the possible overlap with *Ob&Up*’s focus will be interesting to track.

As mentioned, Ob&Up’s proposes to connect/combine the methods of text analysis and metadata collection with close reading to foster media literacy and produce cultural criticism. A. Flicker et al. advocated for this combination in 2018 in the foreword of an editorial special-issue on audiovisual data in DH of VIEW, *Journal of European Television History & Culture*:

... 21st-century researchers should be encouraged to develop new skills in both close and distant reading techniques: new artful practices of "scalable reading", critical combinations of "explorative" distant listening and viewing, conjoined with "interpretative modes" of close inspection, and so forth. These adaptive skills to zoom in and out between big data and distinctive expressive nuance will serve as an unquestionably challenging yet copiously generative mandate for many years of rigorous research to come. (Flicker et al.)

The above quote also points to a larger discourse around DH and Cultural Criticism. How does DH use its "copiously generative mandate" to produce and further cultural criticism? Alan

Liu's essay "Where is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities" speaks to this more significant point. Liu criticizes the discipline as the "practicing partner of distant reading"(Liu) and points to its propensity to overvalue instrumentality and undervalue direct engagement with the public and its experience of culture. For DH to find a constructive place, it needs to work to engage the public in a discourse on culture and the public life it experiences. In a quote that makes use of reality TV, he frames his argument in this way: "...millions tune in each week to watch crab fishermen on the Discovery Channel (*Deadliest Catch*). Humanists may not be salt-of-the-earth crabbers, and archives may not be as stormy as the high seas. But surely, humanists ought on occasion to try to share the excitement of the chase by which breakthrough intellectual discoveries and movements occur" (Liu).

Liu delivers his point by referencing a popular reality TV show and thereby illustrates the essence that *Ob&Up* seeks to embody.

Staff/Roles

Maria Baker, Project Manager: oversees project progress and cohesiveness — works closely with all team members and participates in all aspects of creation.

Teddy Manning, Corpus Manager, Linguist, and Text Analyst: co-creates the corpus — extracts language corpora from sites that archive TV captioning, cleans and tags the data (in collaboration with the project manager and other team members); analyzes the corpus in a variety of ways to consider initial and evolving research questions — applies existing text analysis tools (NLTK Sentiment analysis, and JGaap, Voyant, Wordtree), evaluates findings from a linguistic perspective, and coordinates interpretation of findings with the project manager.

Ruby Chu, Wedesigner & UX Designer: Conceptualizes and creates the project website — integrates and structures edited content (academic and entertainment/interactive components) —works closely with text analyst and project manager

Nuraly Soltonbekov, Researcher & Social Media Strategist: researches various aspects of the project, predominantly where and how *GBBS* fan communities gather and what they discuss, develops social media extensions and outreach in response to research—connects with and shares content as well as game tie-ins regularly with key interest groups, works closely with Project Manager Web Designer.

Work plan

The project, conceptualized at the current scope, will take between 12-14 weeks to complete and will consist of overlapping phases signified by three milestones.

The initial phase, from **Week 1 - Week 6**, is devoted to corpus creation and initial text analysis.

During this time, we will first finalize the specific corpora (in addition to *GBBS*, Season 12). Under the leadership of Teddy Manning, the *GBBS* corpus of Season 12 will be tagged and readied for analysis, along with a second corpus of *GBBS*'s Season 2, as well as a comparison corpus pulled from an American cooking show. The corpora will be available in a csv format via GitHub, and the team will have tagged the judging segments' speakers specifically. **[Milestone 1# finished corpora in csv on GitHub.]** Initial research questions will be formulated during this phase and adjusted on an ongoing basis alongside the development of the corpora. During this phase, Nuraly Solonbekov will conduct research on current *GBBS* fan fora and the presence of *GBBS* fans and *GBBS*-related discourse online to help us define our target audience more specifically. Ruby Chu will investigate which website platform and set-up will best serve the project and, based on the technological capabilities, we will think about the structure and content of the site. Maria Baker will research the technological possibilities for the game components, like Bingo and trivia game.

Overlapping, between **Week 5 - Week 9**, the focus will increasingly shift to text analysis and visualization of findings which, under the leadership of Teddy Manning, will be performed with the assistance of the following platforms and tools: Python and Voyant, NLTK Sentiment analysis, and JGAAP. This will be a time to specify research questions based on initial findings, and it will also

let us understand what findings we want to visualize and represent on the webpage. **[Milestone #2 - Complete text analysis and initial visualizations.]** Conversations about website content and structure will continue, as will related research. And research into stakeholders of the project and outreach strategies will also continue (informed by findings). The level of interactivity and structure of the game component will be finalized during this time as well.

Week 8, MIDPOINT Meeting. During this meeting, we will review all text analysis findings, visualizations, research progress, and website-building possibilities/capabilities. We will set the final scope and structure of the website and determine ancillary content that has to be developed/refined (i.e., papers, process blogs, etc.).

Week 9 - Week 12: During this phase, under Ruby Chu's leadership, the focus will be on finalizing the layout & graphic design of the website and integrating and uploading content. Ruby will also refine the graphic design aspects of the data visualizations chosen to be included. Maria Baker will gather, ready, and edit (for consistency and with an eye on presenting the content for our target audience/s) final versions of verbal content, like white papers, narratives, bios, etc. Nuraly Soltonbekov and Teddy Manning will activate social media accounts and refine our outreach strategy. During these three weeks, the final version of the game/s will be integrated into the site as well. **[Milestone #3 - website completion.]**

Week 12-13: At the beginning of this phase, we will test the site via invited users. Then the focus is on addressing feedback and troubleshooting. Additionally, we'll continue social media outreach.

End of Week 14: Public launch.

Final product and dissemination

The project will primarily exist as a website that consolidates the academic and entertainment components, i.e., the visualized corpora, the interactive game/s with connections to social media accounts, and texts on the project's aim and background. While the visualization of the corpora and the game/s will be the focus of the site and dominate the landing page, academic texts detailing methods and findings will be an essential part of the site and will be available in specifically dedicated sections of the site along with other ancillary material.

Since the project hopes to capture fans of *GBBS* (i.e. viewers of *GBBS* who participate in social media discourse/discussion fora) in addition to a niche audience of linguists and digital humanists, the team plans to reach out via social media in advance of the site's launch. In the preparatory phase, social media connections to affiliated fan groups of *GBBS* as well as individual contacts will be established.

Ahead of a new *GBBS* season's launch (likely in the fall of 2023), the website will be re/introduced via special game content on social media. The game/s should make players curious enough to enter the context/the website. Creating a community of users would follow, and the team would be able to receive valuable feedback on the functionality and effect of the game and the site and prepare for improvements.

Essays for a public audience that reflect and interpret the findings of our text analysis phase, will be submitted to online publications like *Eater* and *Vulture*, which feature cultural criticism with a focus on food and TV, respectively. The project team might also reach out to podcasts on linguistic phenomena, like Slate's *Spectacular Vernacular*. Finally, for interested

linguists, the corpora will be accessible via GitHub to conduct their own analysis and build their own projects.

Further developing the corpora to include additional seasons of *GBBS* judging language would be a first extension of the initial project scope. Ideally, *Ob&Up* will retain its playful core while becoming a growing archive of evaluative food-judging language.

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