

From Kitchen to Language: How food influenced the growth of English vocabulary and expressions

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Abstract

This paper explores the interesting link between our diet and how we communicate. We will examine how culinary history has influenced the English language. For example, the Norman conquest introduced French food terms into English, such as “cow” versus “beef.” The paper looks at cognitive linguistics, focusing on why we use food to express human behavior and feelings. In English, many words, idioms, and expressions relate to food, reflecting cultural exchanges, trade, and shared daily life experiences

Additionally, a small survey was conducted among students to gauge their awareness and use of food-related expressions in English. The responses indicate that these expressions are widely recognized and commonly used in everyday conversations. Such food-related phrases often make communication more vivid, relatable, and culturally significant. Overall, the study illustrates that food is not only a basic human need but also a strong cultural influence that has shaped how people use and understand the English language.

Keywords: Food and Language, Culinary linguistics, Food vocabulary, Language evolution, Food metaphors, Linguistic development, modern food slang.

Introduction

Language is closely tied to different experiences in everyday life. Among these experiences, food plays a significant role. Food is not just a basic need for survival; it also symbolizes culture. Since food is essential to daily life, it naturally finds its way into language. Food appears in vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, metaphors, and phrases.

The English language has evolved over time, influenced by cultural interactions and exchanges. As a result, many food-related words have been added to the language. Words such as pizza,

curry, ketchup, and chocolate serve as examples of this food-related vocabulary. These terms have come from various cultures. Besides vocabulary, food-related expressions have also made their way into the language. Phrases like piece of cake, spill the beans, and bring home the bacon illustrate how food-related expressions have been integrated into English.

This research paper aims to explore how food-related vocabulary and expressions have become part of the language. It will also examine how people understand and use these food-related expressions.

Literature Review

The evolution of the English language reflects significant sociocultural changes, yet few domains have influenced its development as profoundly as food and culinary practices. Traditional linguistic studies have largely focused on grammar, syntax, and structural aspects of language (Sapir, 1929; Crystal, 2003). However, recent scholarship has highlighted a “culinary turn” in language studies, emphasizing that food is not merely a basic necessity but a central force in shaping vocabulary, semantics, and metaphorical expressions (Jurafsky, 2014; Montanari, 2006). Furthermore, food serves as a cultural system that reflects identity, social relations, and shared meanings within societies. As noted by Mohan (2023) and Counihan and Van Esterik (2013), culinary practices are deeply embedded in cultural frameworks and significantly influence linguistic expression across communities.

In this context, the kitchen can be understood as a site of linguistic production, where historical events and social hierarchies are encoded in everyday language (Trudgill, 2000; Bourdieu, 1984). One of the most significant influences on English vocabulary emerged after the Norman Conquest, which introduced a division between Old English and Anglo-French lexical forms. According to Baugh and Cable (2002) and Denning, Kessler, and Leben (2007), this linguistic divide reflected class distinctions: Germanic terms such as cow and pig were associated with farmers, while French-derived terms like beef and pork were used by the ruling class. This distinction illustrates how language evolves in response to power structures and social stratification.

Additionally, the expansion of global trade and colonial interactions contributed to the enrichment of the English lexicon through the incorporation of loanwords from various languages. Words such as chutney, ketchup, and syrup demonstrate how cultural exchange influences language development, a process described as “cultural ingestion” (Montanari, 2006). These linguistic borrowings highlight the dynamic nature of English as it adapts to new cultural contexts and experiences.

From a cognitive perspective, food-related language also plays a crucial role in shaping human thought and perception. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that food functions as a “source domain” for metaphors, enabling individuals to express complex emotions and abstract ideas through sensory experiences. Common expressions such as “half-baked” or “bitter” illustrate how culinary terms are used to convey psychological and emotional states, demonstrating the deep connection between language, cognition, and everyday experience.

Despite extensive research on the historical and cultural aspects of food language, there remains a gap in understanding its psychological and communicative impact in contemporary

contexts. Modern linguistic practices, particularly in digital communication, increasingly incorporate food-related metaphors and expressions. However, the influence of changing food habits and globalization on language use remains underexplored. Therefore, further research is needed to examine how evolving relationships with food continue to shape linguistic expression and meaning in modern society.

Food Influenced Words

Food has influenced English for centuries. Many words, idioms, and expressions in English actually come from food or cooking practices. These words evolved because food is a big part of daily life and culture.

Word	Original Word Meaning	Current Meaning
Honey	Sweet natural food made by bees	Used as a term of affection (“Hello honey”)
Sweet	Taste of sugar	Used to describe something pleasant (“sweet moment”)
Spicy	Food with strong spices	Used for exciting or dramatic situations (“spicy gossip”)
Cheesy	Food made from cheese	Something cheap or overly sentimental
Nutty	Related to nuts	Used to describe someone slightly crazy

Modern Examples of Food-Based Language

Even now in modern era, language is still evolving in kitchen. Here are some of the modern examples that prove my statement that even now language evolves from kitchen

- **"Let Them Cook"**

To give someone the space and time to show off their skills or finish a project without interference.

- **"Cooked" (Sutney aagitten)**
To be in big trouble, exhausted, or completely defeated.
- **"Piece of cake" (Risk edukarathu Elam rusk saapidra mathiri)**

Something that is incredibly easy to do.

When we look at the history of food's influence, we must go back to 1066, when King William the Conqueror invaded England. This invasion created a major divide in social classes. The Normans, who spoke French, ruled the upper class, while the Anglo-Saxons, who spoke English, worked as farmers and labourers. This division affected how food was named and discussed.

- The animals raised by the common people kept their **Old English names**:
 - Cow, Pig, Sheep
- But when these animals were prepared and served as food to the nobles, they were called by **French-derived names**:
 - Cow → Beef
 - Pig → Pork
 - Sheep → mutton

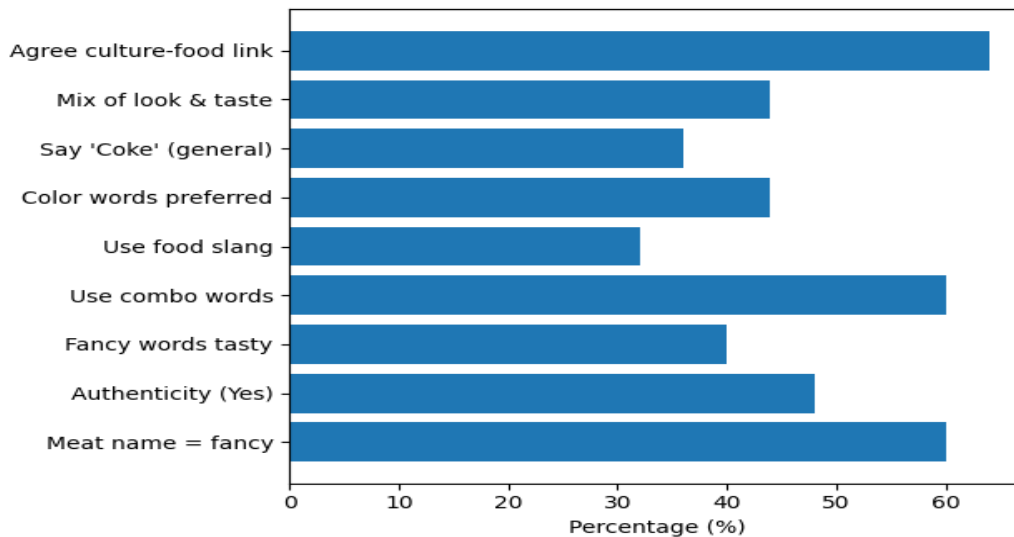
This happened because the lower class raised the animals, while the upper class consumed them, and their language (French) influenced the names of cooked food.

As a result, even today:

- Words like **"beef" and "pork"** sound more formal or expensive
- Words like **"cow" and "pig"** sound simpler or more basic

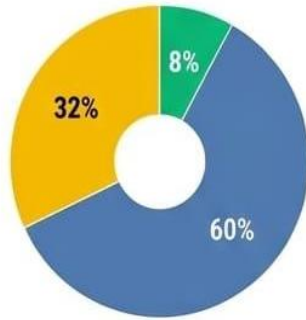
This historical event shows how social hierarchy and culture shaped food vocabulary, and why certain food terms still carry a sense of status or sophistication.

Empirical findings



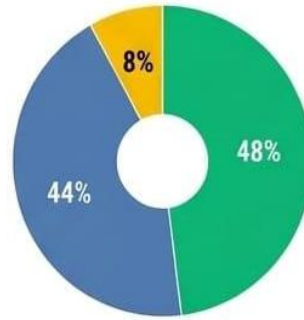
According to the survey, a person's culture affects how they feel about a food's appearance and whether they consider a dish "authentic" or have a connection to that dish's culture. The overall consensus from survey respondents was that meat-sounding names give off a higher-end vibe (60%). There was also a strong consensus regarding the fact that using original/foreign names to describe a dish also helps convey that the dish is "authentic" (48% strongly agree/44% somewhat agree). Food-related language is seen as a contributor to cultural experiences, but 40% think that food-related language (ex. artisanal) improves the taste of food, while others think it is overused. In addition, survey participants thought that new trends in food-related language (specifically blended words like brunch and slang) are acceptable. Visual depictions of food were preferred over taste depictions by survey respondents. Additionally, the majority of respondents thought that food-related language is affected by social media. Lastly, 64% of survey respondents said that the more different types of food they try, the more types of words they learn. The results of the study demonstrate that food-related language plays an impactful, developing and important role in people's lives.

1. We often use different words for the animal (Cow, Pig, Sheep) and the meat we eat (Seef, Pork, Mutton). Which version feels more "fancy" or "expensive" to you?



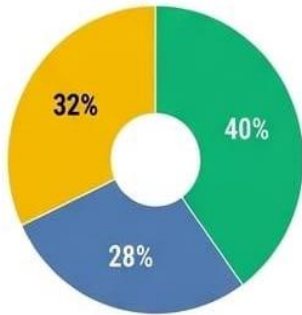
The animal name (like "Pig")	8%
The meat name (like "Pork")	60%
They feel exactly the same to me	32%

2. When you see a dish kept in its original language (like "Sushi" or "Croissant") instead of being translated into English, does it make the food feel more "authentic"?



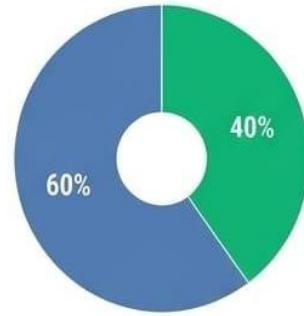
Yes, definitely	48%
A little bit	44%
No, it doesn't matter to me	8%

3. When a menu uses "fancy" words like "Artisanal," "Hand-crafted," or "Infused," does it make you more likely to order that dish?

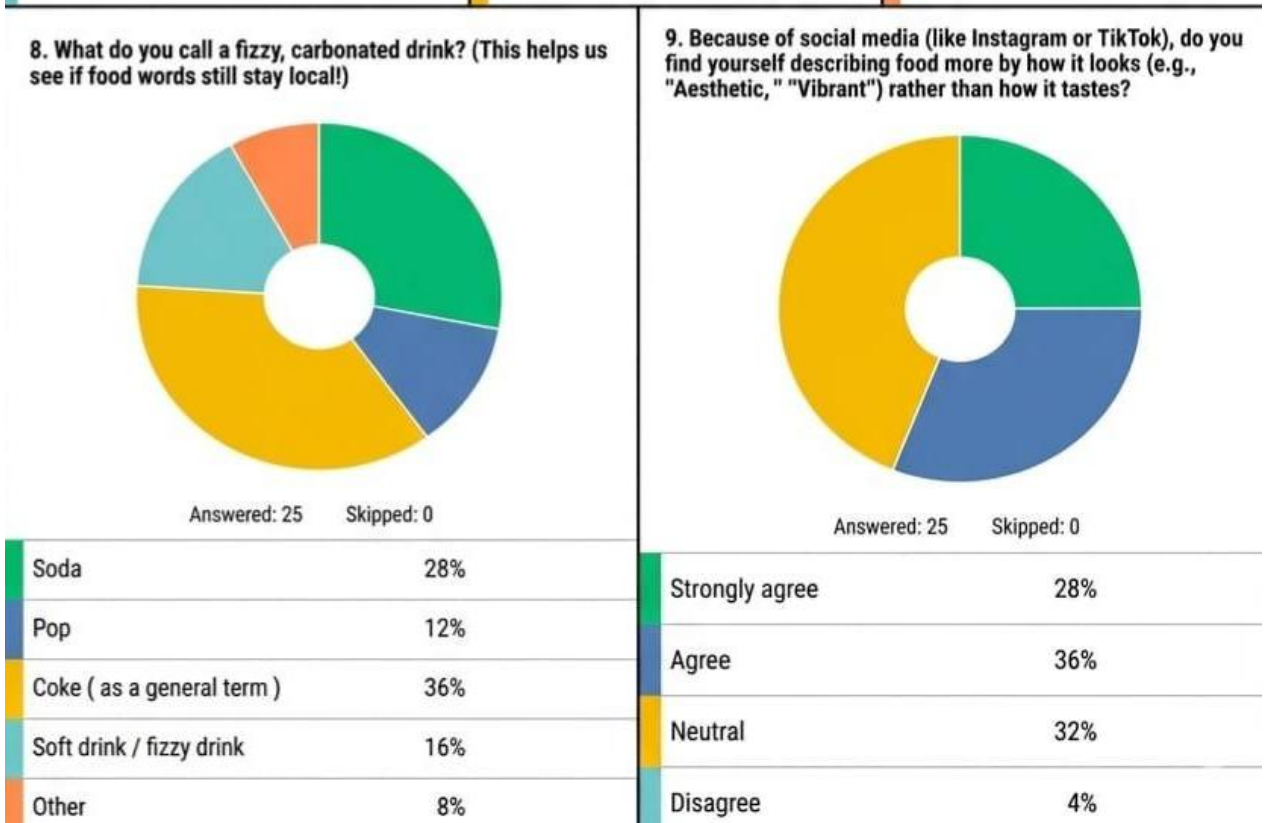
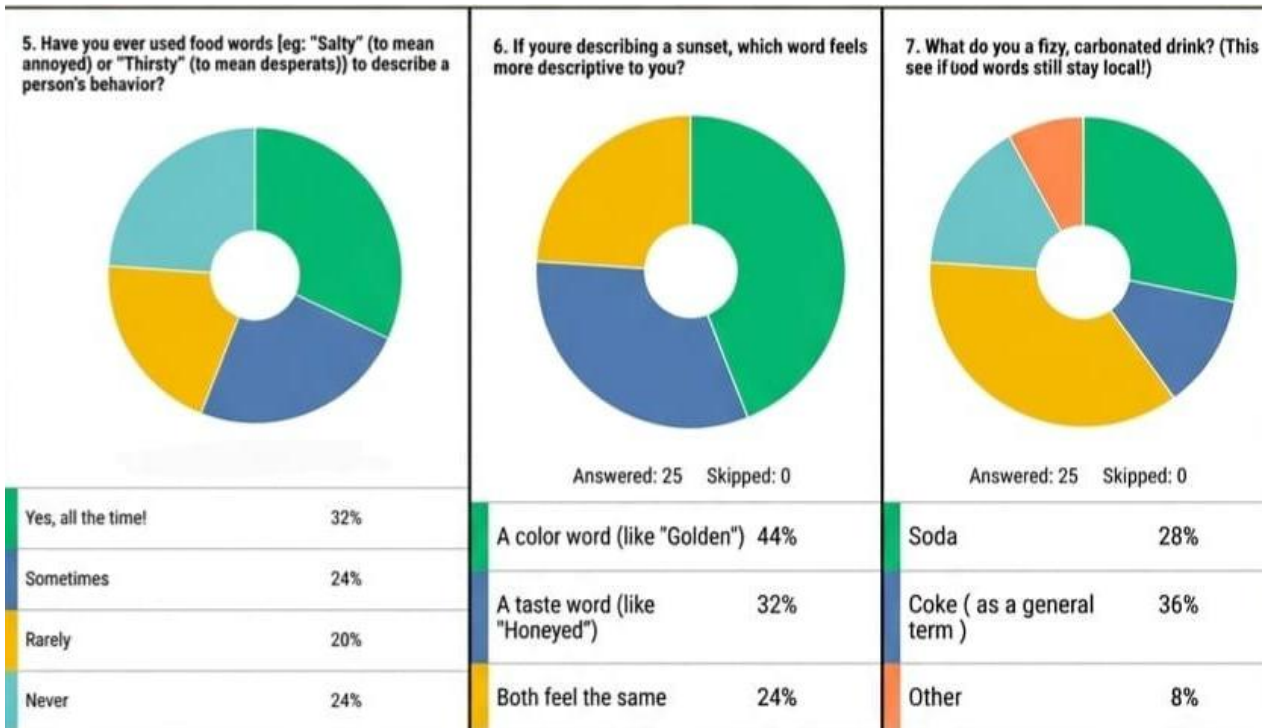


Yes, it sounds much tastier	40%
I don't really notice those words	28%
No, it feels like they are just trying too hard	32%

4. How do you feel about "combo" words like "Brunch" (Breakfast + Lunch) or "Hangry" (Hungry + Angry)?



I love them, they are super useful!	40%
They're okay, I use them sometimes	60%
I'm not a fan; they don't feel	0%



Conclusion

To sum up, it is apparent that the association of food and language has greatly influenced the evolution of language throughout the years. More specifically, from the time of the Norman Conquest until now, there are many phrases that derive from food, such as "let them cook" and "piece of cake," that have affected how people communicate. Food has not only been vital to the survival of humanity, but it has also had a huge influence on how we communicate and express ourselves, as demonstrated by the examples in this paper. Even now, survey data clearly indicates that food continues to play an important role in associating certain words with one another. Thus, it can be said that food has not only had a direct influence on how language is used and created, but it will continue to do so moving forward, as the kitchen has been the and will continue to be the most significant area of evolution for language.

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