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The Salt

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

'Language Of Food' Reveals Mysteries Of Menu Words And Ketchup

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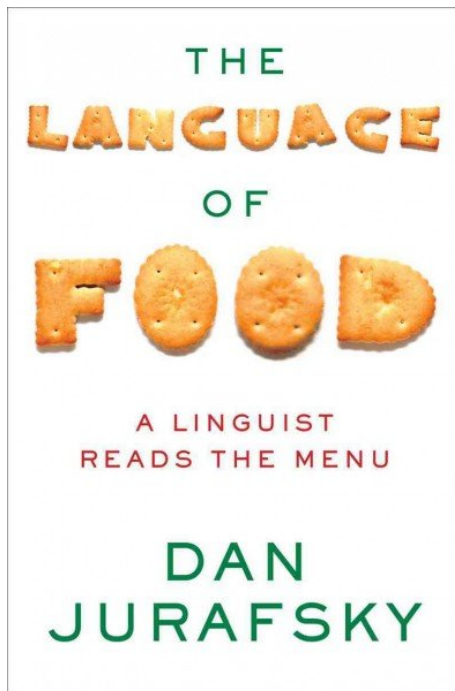
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September 15, 2014 · 4:22 PM ET

Heard on All Things Considered

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The Language of Food

A Linguist Reads the Menu

by Dan Jurafsky

Hardcover, 246 pages

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The words we use for everyday foods contain clues to their origins and hint at their ancient travels across the globe as they merge, fuse and sometimes take on different forms altogether. Stanford University linguist Dan Jurafsky unpacked some of the history with *All Things Considered*'s Robert Siegel and in his book, *The Language of Food*.

Take, for example, ketchup. We all know and love it as a sweet, sour, tomato-based topping that's practically its own food group. Well, it didn't always contain tomatoes, and it definitely was not always American.

Inhabitants of the southern coastal regions of China had for centuries preserved seafood by "layering local fish in jars with cooked rice and salt, covered with bamboo leaves, and left to ferment. The enzymes in the fish convert the starch in the rice to lactic acid, resulting in a salty, pickled fish that could be eaten by scraping off the goopy fermented rice," Jurafsky writes in his book. The recipe was written down in the 5th century and is still used today in parts of Southeast Asia.

In the 17th century, English and Dutch sailors and traders traveled to Asia, "and they brought home barrels of this Chinese fish sauce, and this fish sauce was called ketchup. -*Tchup* is a word for sauce in Chinese dialects," he says. And the syllable *ke* means "preserved fish" in Hokkien, the language of southern Fujian and Taiwan.

The sailors, probably hoping to perk up their hardtack, quickly adopted the fishy ketchup, and merchants saw the opportunity to sell an expensive and exotic sauce from Asia to Europeans, Jurafsky writes.

By the 19th century, the British were making their own ketchup, adding tomatoes but still relying on anchovies for flavor, as evidenced by early recipes, Jurafsky says. Eventually, tastes changed and the anchovies were out while other ingredients like mushrooms and oysters came into vogue. "Ketchup" became a catchall word for a spiced sauce.

"And so in England, ketchup lost the fish and acquired tomatoes, and much later on, the Americans added sugar, and there's our national condiment," he says.

The Story Of Ketchup

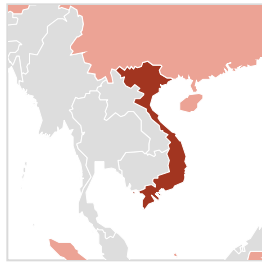
Sour-sweet tomato ketchup began as a humble fermented fish sauce off the southern coast of China thousands of years ago as a way to make food last during the dry season. Across oceans, centuries and cultures it evolved into the mass-produced sauce we know so well today.



Before 200 BCE

China

The Yi people preserved food by layering fish, rice and salt — a process that produces a pungent sauce. Many of these people later moved into southeast Asia.



1500s

Vietnam

kecap-ikan

Fujianese traders and seamen in the bustling ports fell for the stuff, naming it *ke-tchup*, meaning preserved-fish sauce.

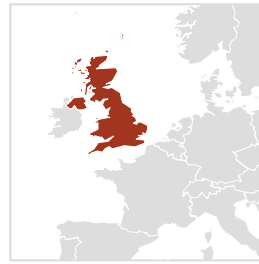


1600s

Indonesia

kecap, ke-tchup

Fujianese settlers set up Chinese sauce-making factories, and British sailors discovered the fish sauce and flavored their hardtack with it.

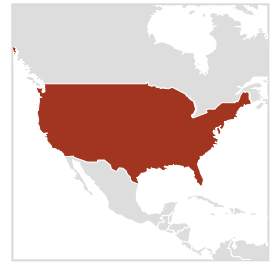


Late 1600s

Great Britain

ketchup, chatchup, catsup

British sailors brought the sauce home. The British recipe evolved to include mushroom and tomatoes and exclude fish.



Late 1800s

United States

catsup, ketchup

The American recipe became thicker and sweeter than its British cousin, and cooks added more sugar and vinegar.

Source: *The Language of Food: A Linguist Reads the Menu* by Dan Jurafsky

Credit: April Fulton and Alyson Hurt / NPR

Tracing the origins of ketchup has also raised questions about our version of world history. "The traditional view of economic history says that in the Ming Dynasty, China turned inward and had to be dragged into the modern global world much later. But the story of ketchup tells us that China was really the center of world trade," Jurafsky tells Siegel.

But the language of food is not limited to history lessons.



CODE SWITCH

Ketchup: The All-American Condiment That Comes From Asia

Food, and how we describe it today, can also tell us a lot about what it's going to cost us when we go out to eat tonight.

THE SALT

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"Expensive restaurants are 15 times more likely to tell you where the food comes from — to mention the grass-fed things or the name of the farm or greenmarket cucumbers, but expensive restaurants also use fancy, difficult words like *tonarelli*, or *choclo* [large-kernalled corn] or *pastilla*," Jurafsky says. But they are also generally shorter in length.

The really long menus, which he says are "stuffed with adjectives like fresh, rich, mild, crisp, tender and golden brown," are found at the middle-priced restaurants.

And the cheapest restaurants use "positive but vague words — 'delicious,' 'tasty,' 'savory,'" he says. If an expensive restaurant used words like "fresh" and "delicious," that "implies you have to be convinced."

Cheaper restaurants are also likely to say that the food should be served "your way."

"The more expensive the restaurant, the more it's all about the chef," he says.

menu fish sauce dan jurafsky ketchup

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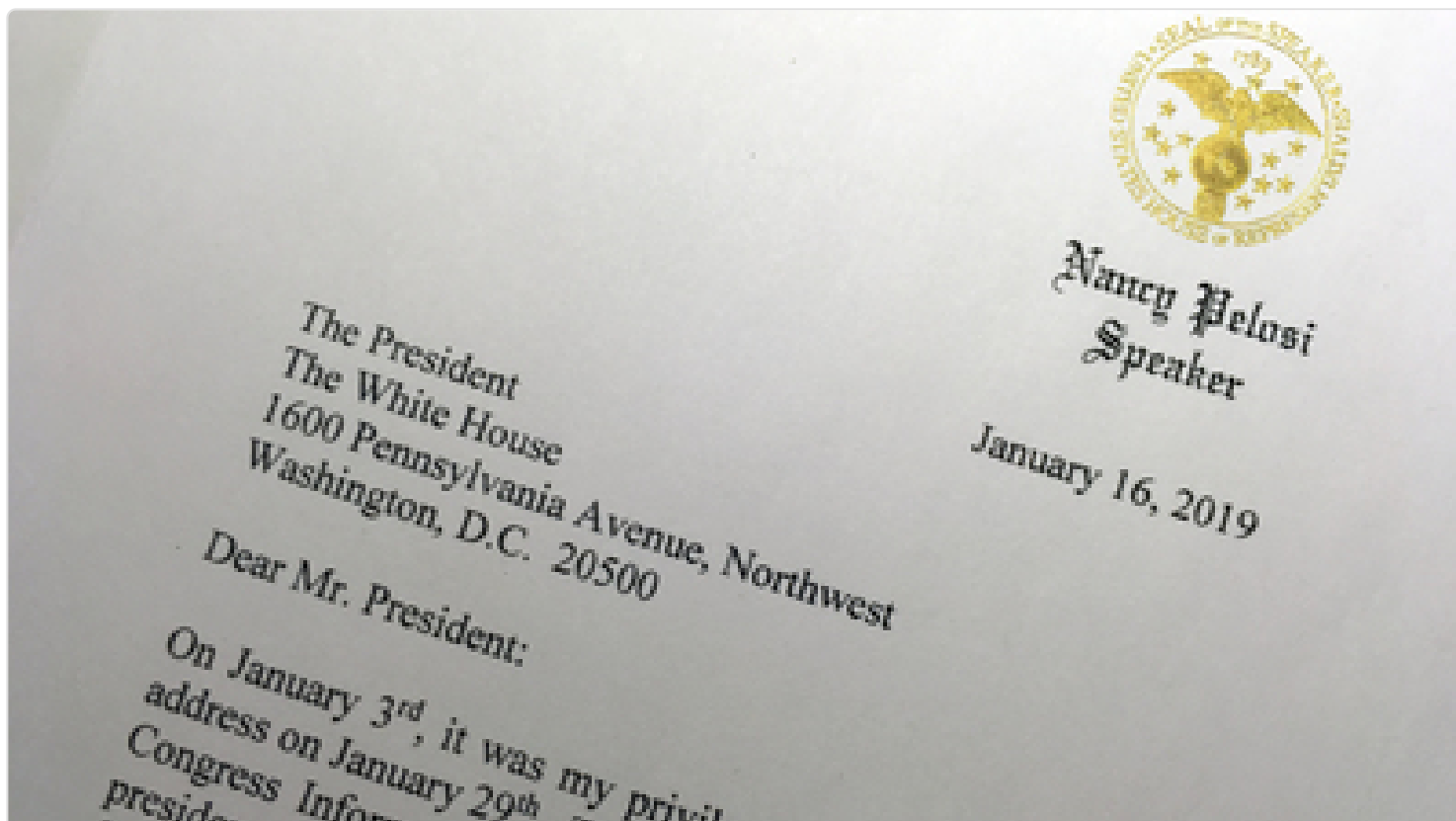
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UNPRESIDENTED

ENDING CRISIS, TRUMP HASTILY DEPARTS WHITE HOUSE

On May 11, barely six months after the election storm, Donald Trump appears to have abandoned the White House and abdicated his role as president. He issued no formal statement through the White House press pool, after weeks of denigration of legitimacy — claim they found a laptop on the president's desk in the Oval Office on the evening of April 10, swindled in and out with the following message: "Don't Contact Hillary & Bill & the Fake News Media."

By [unclear] | 11 hours ago

"Finally!" say critics

From "Mittens" to "You're Fired"

Donald Trump's tenure has been full of real estate deals — after all, the 45th president's wealth is estimated to be over \$1 billion — but his political career has been a roller coaster. From his victory over Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election to his current position as president, he has faced a series of challenges, including the Russia investigation and the impeachment process.

By [unclear]

Pres. Pence begins 'clipped duck' term

"I suspect that 50 years from now Mike Pence will be regarded primarily as the answer to a trivia question," said Jonathan Chait, the Politico Press writing columnist. "What I will never see is a widely respected president."

By [unclear]

Celebrations break out worldwide as Trump era ends

Worldwide, brightly lit street parties popped up in major cities and small towns as people rejoiced the American president had fled. In many cases, it was the first time since the 1980s that the United States had seen a president who was not a member of the political establishment.

By [unclear]

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