

FOOD SUBTRACTIVES: LOSING -ED AND -LY

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A lot of strange things have been happening to our food in the past thirty or forty years, many of which I would prefer not to think about - maybe even know about. As our technology has developed, the various food industries have attempted in numerous ways to "improve" our food; many of their attempts have involved adding chemicals to "improve" taste, texture, color, aroma, shelf life, profits, etc. Of course, not everyone has been in favor of such improvements. Among some groups there has been a great hue and cry over the use of food additives; but this minor uproar has been of little consequence. Manufacturers continue to add, and we continue to consume, up to nine pounds per year per person.

To the average American, the issue of food additives is hardly a burning one. In fact, most Americans never think about food additives at all. However, I have been noticing lately a very subtle - perhaps even unconscious - movement, a kind of grass roots backlash, against food additives. I have noticed (and I should confess here that I am a compulsive reader: signs, menus, advertisements, everything, down to and including the fine print) that in our language of food, we seem to be practicing what I have termed "linguistic subtraction." (An earlier term, "linguistic shortening," was scrapped for obvious reasons.) As a nation, we are developing the habit of dropping the past participle morpheme from past participles serving as adjectives. This may sound complicated but it's actually very simple. For example, all across the nation canned goods is becoming can goods.

The observations that I offer here are, in most cases, a reader's observations, not a listener's. Now as any first-term linguistics student can tell you, to the practicing linguist language means first and foremost language as it is spoken, language as sound. Written language, which is, in a sense, what I am dealing with here, is considered a minor facet of linguistic study, far less important than speech. This is so because, as the linguist sees it, writing - unlike speech - is highly conservative, and usually (remember, I teach freshman composition) involves careful planning, revision, recourse to authority, and so forth. I fully agree with this distinction between speech and writing - in principle. But I must insist that this strict demarcation between "spoken" and "written" can be misleading. The "written" data I offer here, data from hand-written signs and employee-typed menus and local advertising flyers are, in my view, closer to speech than writing. I feel the data represent not the writer's attempt to be correct, but rather his attempt to transcribe his own speech, so that the data

are, in effect, a layman's attempt at phonetic transcription. If this is true, this "written" data could indeed be indicative of a widespread sound change.

Being a good linguist, I make no value judgements. To me, language change is simply that - change, neither for the better nor for the worse. Language has been changing since the instant man began to speak, and it will continue to change as long as there are men to speak. (And if certain men don't start speaking to certain other men pretty soon, there may not be men left to speak much longer. But that's another essay.) To see in any kind of language change evidence of the demise of culture or of the decline of civilization is to fly in the face of historical fact, something I would rather not do. I will offer a speculation about why this particular change is taking place, and some predictions about the possible effects of the change. But beyond this, I shall not venture.

The dropping of the past participle morpheme, the [-ed], can be seen, from one point of view, as an "economical" change. By this I mean that the new form gets the job done more efficiently, that it conveys basically the same information with less energy expenditure. The example I cited above illustrates this well: saying can goods requires less energy than saying canned goods, and can goods is also easier to pronounce. (Since it is not really necessary, I will not write out these forms phonetically; any accomplished speaker of English will know from the spelling how the different forms are pronounced.) But perhaps a better example is an item which is turning up on menus everywhere: ice tea. It is obviously quite a bit easier to say ice tea than iced tea; in fact, in all but the most carefully controlled speech, the t sound at the end of iced will merge with the t sound beginning tea, and the result will be ice tea. In both these examples, the meaning of the phrase should remain clear for a long time, at least as long as cans and ice are part of our daily lives.

Can goods and ice tea are examples of the change in process, but the change they illustrate is not really a new one. The tendency to drop the [-ed] has apparently been with us for quite some time. This tendency does seem to be getting stronger, but as several of our favorite food items show, it is far from new. A prime example is roast beef. Originally, of course, this was roasted beef, beef that had been roasted; but in time the past participle marker was lost, and it became simply roast beef. (Note that roast appears here to be an adjective; more about these "false" adjectives later.) In this particular case, the head noun itself became expendable, so it is now possible to talk about (a) roast. Another interesting case involving roast is ground roast coffee, where the past participle morpheme was dropped from roasted but where, because grind is a so-called "irregular" verb, the morpheme was retained in ground. One can only speculate what kind of coffee we would be drinking if grind were "regular." Another example, similar to roast beef, is toast, which must have begun as toasted bread. I have no evidence, however, of an intermediate form, one

that would correspond to the intermediate form roast beef (i.e., toast bread). One final example is barbecue. This has gone from barbecued meat to barbecue meat to barbecue (and barbecues - but how the phrase sloppy joes got started I don't know).

So far, all my examples have had as their original form Past Participle + Noun (or PP + PP + Noun, as in ground roast coffee). But there is another set of "economical" changes involving phrases which have as their original form Adverb + Past Participle + Noun. For example, consider lightly battered fish. Many phrases like this one are undergoing a change similar to, but more complex than, the change PP + Noun phrases are. In these phrases, the adverb is losing its "adverb" marker, [-ly], and the verb is losing its past participle marker. The result is that what appears to be an Adjective + Adjective + Noun sequence. (As I promised, more about adjectives below.) So, lightly battered fish is becoming light batter fish; it already has at Mrs. Paul's. This change is especially noticeable in phrases containing the word flavor. One example should be sufficient: what years ago would have been spoken and written cheese flavored is now cheese flavor (as in Doritos). This kind of change is taking place in non-food items too: lightly scented deodorant is becoming light scent deodorant. The careful observer will, I am sure, find many other examples.

In the examples dealt with so far, the meaning of the phrases, as well as the meaning of the constituent words, seems relatively safe. But there are examples of [-ed] loss that have, for many of us, lost their original, specific meaning. A good example is the old favorite, hash brown potatoes. Now when both hash and brown had their past participle morphemes attached, the meaning of the phrase was quite clear; it had to mean potatoes that had been hashed and browned. As long as the [-ed] is present to indicate that a process of some sort has taken place, interpretation is not too difficult; we need only know the meaning of the words being used. But when the [-ed] is lost - and especially when it is lost from a word no longer commonly used, whose meaning is no longer widely known - a real problem can result. This can be seen in the word hash. (Note that the head noun has become expendable in this case too, giving us hash browns.)

The same problem can be seen in a phrase that is changing right now: corned beef is in many areas becoming corn beef. The problem here is obvious. As long as the [-ed] is still attached to corn, we will at least know how to go about interpreting the phrase. Even if we don't know that corning is a process by which we pickle something by soaking it in brine, we will at least know that corned beef is not a special kind of beef from a special kind of cow - which is what corn beef seems to indicate - but beef that has been processed, or prepared, in some special way. As long as the process is still familiar, though, there is little problem with interpretation: for example, bake beans, steam clams, cream corn, etc.

We cannot be certain whether meaning loss precedes the loss of the [-ed], or whether the loss of the [-ed] is an initial step in

the loss of meaning. My first two examples, *can goods* and *ice tea*, seem to indicate that change in form precedes loss of meaning; but there is nothing here to indicate that such a change "causes" meaning loss. *Corn beef*, on the other hand, seems to be evolving because fewer and fewer people know about the process of *corning*; and the change from *corned* to *corn* may well serve to make even fewer aware of the process. It may be that no general rule covers the changes we are examining. Each case may well be unique.

As I mentioned above, we can see changes like the loss of the morpheme [-ed] as "economical" changes, economical in that they allow us to use less energy in conveying the same information and provide us with forms that are easier to pronounce. It is tempting to see in such changes evidence that the language is becoming "simpler." But as a learned professor once warned me (a learned professor, by the way, who once suffered the righteous wrath of pop language critic John Simon), changes that appear to be simplifications are not simplifications at all - or, to be more accurate, are not simplifications in the language as a whole. Simplification in one area always results in added complexity in another.

He was, of course, quite right about this. By dropping [-ed] from both *hashed* and *browned*, we have simplified pronunciation considerably, but we have certainly complicated the process of perception, and thus interpretation. The new, "economical" form is without a doubt harder to decipher than the original, and will become even harder. (Not one of my seventy freshmen knew exactly what *hash brown potatoes* are.) So, we can see that what initially appeared to be economical is not really economical at all. No real energy is saved, if we look at the entire system. Energy expenditure has simply been shifted from speaker to listener.

Before ending this discussion, I must mention one final point. When the [-ed] is lost from a past participle that modifies a noun, the resulting word appears to remain, judging from its form and position, a true adjective. But in many cases, this shortened form simply cannot function as a true adjective. *Can goods* simply does not "make sense" the way a phrase like *expensive goods* does. Generative transformational grammar has shown us that what appears in surface structure as an Adjective + Noun sequence is, in deep structure, really a sentence. Thus, *expensive goods* is the surface manifestation of the deep structure sentence *goods are expensive*. In this light, it is quite obvious that the form which usually results from [-ed] loss cannot be an adjective as defined by generative transformation grammar. *Can goods* does not, as it would appear to, come from the deep structure sentence *goods are can*; this makes no sense whatsoever. But *canned goods* obviously does come from *goods are canned*.

There are some instances, however, where the past participle shorn of its [-ed] can function as a true adjective, although of course there is always some change in meaning. Sometimes the result is merely confusing, or absurd; sometimes it is rather humorous. For example, in *hash brown potatoes* (and I do apologize for

-serving the same example over and over), brown can serve perfectly well as an adjective, meaning the color brown. But this certainly raises a question about hash. What is it? A shade of brown, it would seem. And in candy apple, the object denoted would seem to be candy in the shape of an apple (cf. candy canes and licorice whips). The original form, candied apple, makes the meaning clear. The same is true for candy sweet potatoes, though this offers yet another problem in interpretation. How sweet are they? Candy sweet? But my two favorite examples (linguistically speaking, that is - I can't stand the taste of either), both of which I've recently seen advertised in local stores, are pickle eggs and devil eggs. Now I really don't want to play the role of egghead, or to appear hard-boiled, but I sometimes wonder if the people who write such signs don't have a very odd notion of where Vlasic gets its pickles, or if they haven't seen Rosemary's Baby or The Exorcist once too often.

PERIODICAL TITLE ABBREVIATIONS

When authors cite magazine or journal articles in a bibliography, they generally try to save space by using an abbreviated form of the periodical name. Unfortunately, such abbreviations are far from standardized, with the result that the same periodical can be encoded in different ways (the Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism has been listed as JA, JAAC, J Aes Art C, J Aes Art Crit, J Aesth, J Aesth & Art C, J Aesthetics, JARCA, J1 Aesthetics, Jnl Aesthetics, Jnl Aesthetics & Art Crit, and Jour Aesthetics and Art Crit). More serious problems arise when going in the other direction, when the same set of letters can stand for several journals. The two-volume Periodical Title Abbreviations (Gale Research Company, Fifth Edition, 1986, \$150 per volume) provides a way out of both ambiguities by listing all abbreviations of a periodical, and all periodicals having a specific abbreviation.

Name collectors can find many curiosa here; Mary's Own Paper, No More Cages, Prisoners Journal, Push from the Bush, Yellow Brick Road, Worm Runner's Digest, Devil's Box, Gopher Music Notes and Crawdaddy are all, apparently, periodicals. Research projects suggest themselves: for example, how many letters should an abbreviation use to avoid ambiguity? (Sampling the list, two-letter abbreviations lead to confusion 86 per cent of the time, three-letter ones, 25 per cent, but four-letter ones, only 7 per cent.) From how short an abbreviation can the periodical name still be reconstructed? (For a related study, see "Compression of English Text", Word Ways, May 1982). Word Ways has only one recognized abbreviation, W Ways, which may explain why the editor occasionally receives mail addressed to World Ways (a non-existent journal). The two volumes are edited by Leland G. Alkire, Jr.