

Sports Through Food Words in America¹

Sonoko HIROSHIMA *

Introduction

America has a history of immigrants with different ethnic backgrounds who brought language, food and culture from all over the world. Language, food and culture, respectively, have a close relationship. As we come across many expressions in which derivative meanings are included, it is often difficult to understand because we lack cultural knowledge of the country. That is to say, we can understand the meaning of the word if we know the culture of the country. With foods, for example, when *pumpkin* came into American English from French, it became a slang expression meaning *head*. The Popular culture, which has developed since the 1920s, is now defining American culture. Sports such as baseball and football are national games, and an integral part of American culture.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how sports developed in America, what expressions derived from food are in connection with sports, and to research whether those expressions are commonly used by native speakers of English.

I . CULTURE FOR AMERICANS

1. Popular Culture in America

Popular culture is a collage of musical, television, films, popular music, sports, and fast foods in America. Popular culture is the culture of mass appeal. What are the masses? In America, it includes Caucasians, African-Americans, Native Americans, other immigrants, and their descendants. As culture in America must represent the diversity of ethnic groups it needs to be understandable, dynamic and attractive. Popular culture is characterized by a creation that is popular when it is created to respond to the experiences and values of the majority, when it is produced in such a way that the majority of the people have easy access to it; and, when it can be understood and interpreted by that majority without the aid of special knowledge or experience.² Moreover, it must

* 外国語教室・非常勤講師 (Department of Foreign Languages)

be comprehensive.

The study of popular culture is now a legitimate subject in America. It is defined as follows. First, according to Ray B. Browne, it is, "all the experiences in life shared by people in common, generally though not necessarily disseminated by the mass media"³. Secondly, *OED* makes it evident that it can mean both 'intended for and suited to ordinary people,' or 'prevalent or current among, or accepted by, the people generally.'⁴ Thirdly, perhaps the most useful definition by Norman F. Cantor and Michael S. Werthman is refined by M. Thomas Inge:

Popular culture is what we do by choice to engage our minds and our bodies when we are not working or sleeping. This can be active — playing baseball, driving an automobile, dancing — or passive — watching television, sunbathing, or reading a book. It can be creative — painting a portrait, writing a poem, cooking a meal — or simply responsive — playing a game, watching a circus, or listening to music.⁵

2. Historical Background of Popular Culture

When the Puritans were in New England, they did not have any entertainment. In everyday life, working came first, and amusement came second. Moreover, for Puritans, asceticism was the most important thing. Playing bowls or cards was attributed to the devil; dancing was punishable by death. However, as people from a great variety of countries came to America, different cultural and social values were introduced from all over the world. They were gradually assimilated into one culture — American culture.

It can be thought that the beginning of entertainment was recreation for both the immigrants who engaged in opening this new land and slaves from Africa who were enforced hard labor in Southern part of America. They sang prayer songs and danced to remember their home lands and customs for encouragement and comfort. In the eighteenth century, the American circus in two forms began. One was a show which amused people in the hippodrome, the other was a menagerie which emphasized educational values. The latter performed as a means for escaping the puritanical attack from the Church. The audience found release from their daily toil and experienced a wonderful time and good feelings. The circus was the culture itself for them.

After the Civil War, popular culture emerged more definitively in America, and by the 1920s it was appreciated as a distinctly American phenomenon. The 1920s was called the Roaring Twenties. It was the age when American society prospered and produced popular heroes like Babe Ruth, Lindbergh, Al Capone and so on. During the 1920s, young people began to rebel against the old system of Puritanism.

In sum, why did popular culture develop in America? Let us note six important reasons.

1. There was a large mass of people who had the money and the time to enjoy the elements of a popular culture in America. A significant middle class had grown out of the industrial development following the Civil War.

2. There was the social and political freedom to enjoy influences from various cultures. Popular culture may not exist without political, social and conceptional freedom, whenever there are different groups of people.

3. It is a fact that America is a nation consisting of immigrants from all over the world. They brought different cultures to America, and American cultural foundations are based on diversity.

4. There was no dominant culture in America. Thus popular culture did not suffer any cultural domination or control. Even in colonial days under the control of England, America accepted cultures from not only England, but also other countries.

5. There was the geographical space which could spread the masses' dream and make full use of their energies — unexplored frontiers, and big cities like Chicago and New York. The masses were given the inspiration to produce an original mass culture from the joy, and hope, or anxiety, and sorrow of their daily experiences.

6. There was the development of mass media in America. European elite culture was fashioned by patrons, and supported and preserved by the elite. On the other hand, American popular culture was fashioned by the masses in order to buy culture as cheap as possible for enjoyment. Selling popular products to the majority of people was accomplished through the effectiveness of mass media. Furthermore, the opening of the railways caused further development of mass media. Books and magazines, for example, were distributed on a nationwide scale.

In the 1920s when a large number of immigrants from European countries entered America, it was said that America was a melting pot. Nevertheless, there existed a serious problem in assimilating immigrants into American society. American popular culture offered an opportunity to establish the relationship between the nation and the individual. Immigrants accepted popular culture, and learned the American life style from films, television and radio. They became assimilated into America through mass media; they experienced Americanization.

II. FOOD WORDS AND SPORTS

Sports grew not only in New England, but all along the frontier. From morning to evening, the farmers and their wives endured the hard work that was necessary on the frontier. They were not permitted to have any enjoyment. Later as they had more spare time, entertainment became necessary and developed its own style. Hunting and fishing were both a means of getting food, and a form of diversion.

There is a relationship between sport and hunting. Sporting activities are essentially modified forms of hunting behavior. Viewed biologically, the modern football player is revealed as a member of a disguised hunting pack. His killing weapon has turned into a harmless football and his prey into a goal.⁶ The athletes experience the vigorous physical activity so typical of the hunting scene, and the patterns they perform are all elements of the ancient hunting sequence, but their triumph has been transformed from the actual kill to a symbolic one of 'winning'.⁷

Football has become a kind of national ritual in the United States. Not only do cheering crowds of thousands watch football matches in the nation's college and high school stadiums, but millions of people are glued to TV screens in the fall, week after week to watch football games. Almost half of the entire population greets the New Year by viewing four major bowl games — Rose Bowl in Pasadena, the **Orange Bowl** in Miami, the **Sugar Bowl** in New Orleans, and the Cotton Bowl in Dallas.

What makes football such a popular sport? Owing its origin to nineteenth century English soccer and rugby, the game has become the ultimate expression of American machismo — rough, tough, gutsy, competitive and action-packed. It is the dream of many red-blooded American boys to become football stars. Youngsters have been imbued with the notion that football builds character. The American expressions like "be a man" and "separate the men from the boys" are often applied to football-playing youngsters.⁸ Surviving the rigors of football training and games is considered a sign of courage.

Baseball is national game as well. The game of baseball became a central part of the American culture. The phrase "to hit a home run" meant that a person was successful in any aspect of American life like making a good business decision. In the 1850s, baseball was called the *New York game*, because the baseball teams in New York City and the suburbs formed the game from the British game of rounders. Baseball has distinctly American characteristics. While most team sports, such as soccer and basketball, respect solidarity, baseball is much more important because it is played by individual batters and pitchers. In this way, it can be said that baseball is a suitable and ideal

sport for an individualistic American society.

American baseball has two main leagues, major league and minor league — sometimes called the **steak league** for the former, and the **hamburger league** for the latter. This is because the major league players make big money and can have steak everyday, whereas the minor league players make little money and can have only hamburgers. The **Grapefruit league**, on the other hand, indicates the association of the major league teams as they play exhibition games against each other in preseason training because most spring training camps are held in citrus growing regions like Florida.

We can find other food words in baseball play. In pitching, **cheese** means a fast ball. **Pepper** means a fast and hard session of pitch-and-catch, usually a warming up or loosening up activity in which several players practice in a semicircle a short distance from a batter field. A **beanball** also means a pitch that hits or nearly hits the batter's head, and is sometimes used to intimidate the batter. A high and easy fly ball is called a **can of corn**, and a base hit is called a **cookie**. **Goose egg** is used in the sense of a score of zero, not only in baseball games, but also in other athletic contests.

The term **hot dog** portrays athletes who perform in a brilliant, spectacular way, especially in order to seize the admiration of an audience. This expression is used for surfers who surf spectacularly, and for free-style skiers who do somersaults, midair turns, balletlike figures, and other feats. The first use of this term was recorded in 1973. "Hot dog', or acrobatic, skiing has become a fast-growing sport in the United States." — *Internat. Herald Tribune*, 9 Feb. (OED). Furthermore, there is a relationship between baseball and the hot dog. According to *Hot Dog Highway* by Oscar Mayer & Co., Inc., it explained:

The term "hot dog" was coined in 1900 at the New York Polo Grounds. One cold April day, concessionaire Harry Stevens was losing money with ice cream and soda, so he sent his salesmen out to buy up all the dachshund sausages they could find. Soon his vendors were selling hot dogs from portable hot water tanks, shouting "They're red hot! Get your dachshund sausages while they're red hot!" In the press box, sports cartoonist Tad Dorgan was nearing his deadline and desperate for an idea. Hearing the vendors, he hastily drew a cartoon of barking dachshund sausages nestled warmly in rolls. Not sure how to spell "dachshund" he simply wrote "hot dog!" The cartoon was sensation — and the term "hot dog" was born.⁹

Since 1957, every July has been called **hot dog month**. This is because everyone enjoys sports outdoors in July and hot dogs are appropriate and easily prepared food for sports events.

Ⅲ. FIELD WORK BY QUESTIONNAIRES

1. The Purpose of This Investigation

This field work was carried out with questionnaires in 1993, mainly in the United States, in order to examine whether these expressions are commonly used by native speakers of English or not. The informants were 80 people who speak English as their first language. The subjects were made up of 42 males and 38 females, whose ages were from 10 years old to 72 years old. Since their places of birth included all regions of the U. S., the subjects were divided into three groups coming from — the West, the East and the South — according to the general linguistic atlas by Kurath. English speakers living in the U. S. other than Americans were treated as foreigners. There were 52 Western people, 7 Southern people, 5 Eastern people and 16 foreigners. In regard to occupations, there was a wide variety, such as flight attendants, bankers, students, teachers, engineers, librarians, accountants and the like.

The purpose of this investigation is to examine the frequency of each of the 13 expression from three points of view — the distinction of sexes, ages and regions. Occupations were omitted for the reason previously stated. Five items, which are 'unknown', 'never used', 'rarely used', 'occasionally used', and 'frequently used' were prepared and marked by 80 informants. It would be ideal if we could examine an equal number of subjects from each region but the majority of the people were from the Middle-West, although, the Middle-West is the largest area in the American linguistic atlas as a matter of course. Therefore, the distribution of regions might be unreliable. At the same time, it is hard to analyze social status as an important sociolinguistic factor because of the great variety of occupations. On the contrary, the result of the comparison between males and females must be reliable because there is almost the same number of male and female informants.

2. The Frequency Analysis of 13 Expressions

The following charts show that 'unknown' is counted as 0 point; 'never used' is 25 points; 'rarely used' is 50 points; 'occasionally used' is 75 points; 'frequently used' is 100 points, and they are compared by sexes, ages and regions respectively.

In conclusion, males know all of the expressions better than females. It might be assumed that especially baseball and football are more familiar sports for men more than women. As for ages, although the people whose age is more than fifty have more vocabulary as a matter of course, people in their twenties tend to know more popular ex-

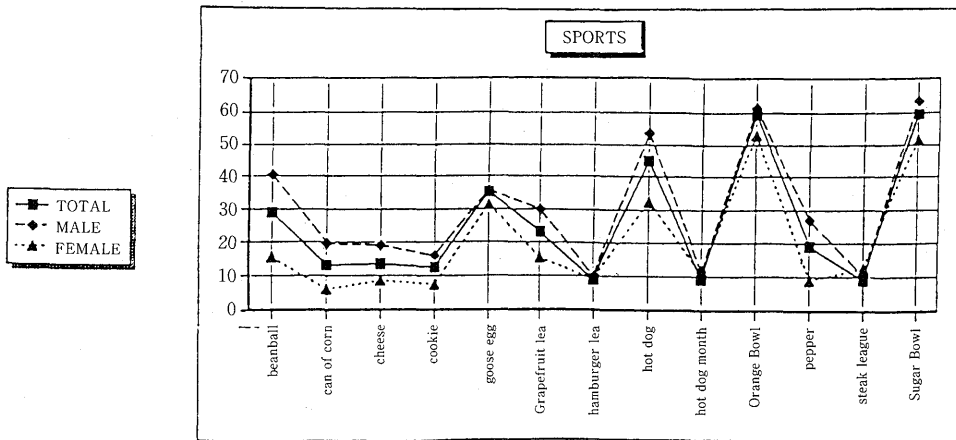


Figure 1. The Distribution by Sexes

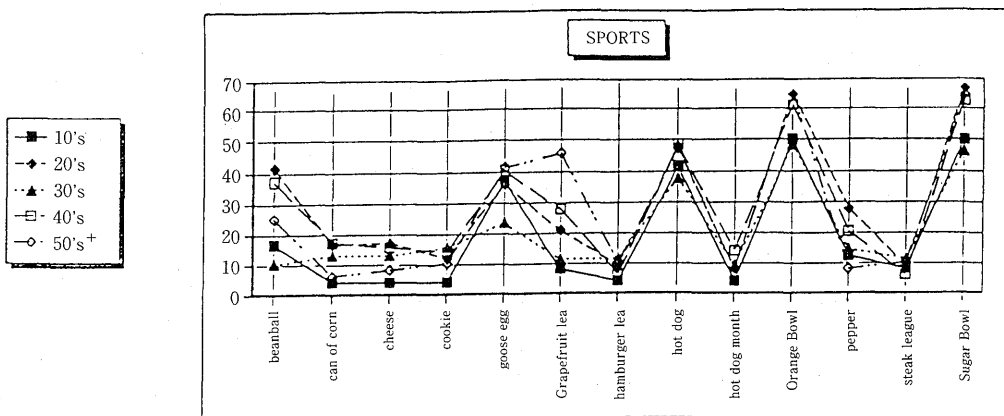


Figure 2. The Distribution by Ages

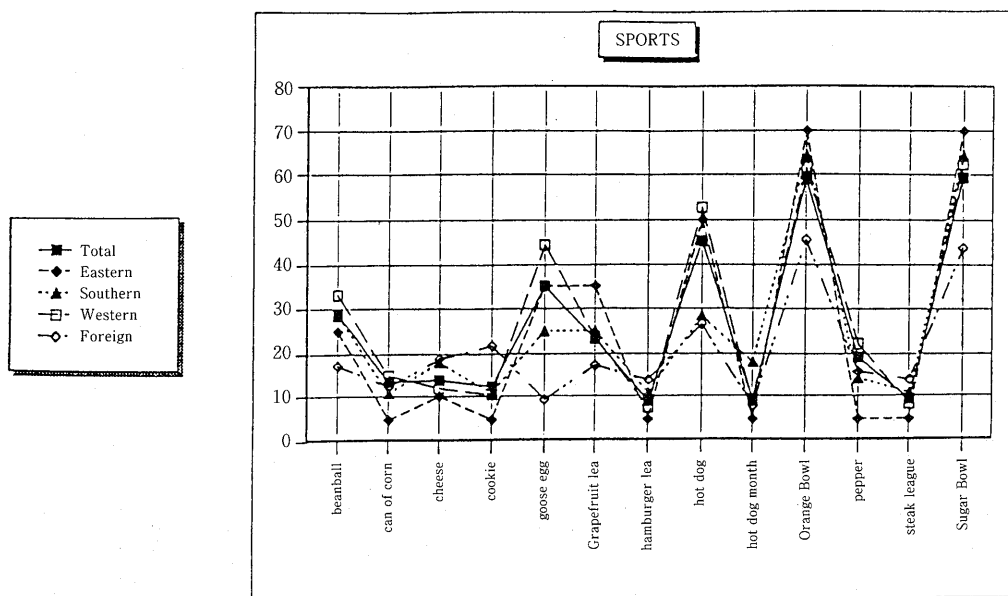


Figure 3. The Distribution by Regions

pressions. It might show that they are the most interested in sports of all the age groups. Regarding regions, those from the East do not know so many of the expressions. On the whole, **Orange Bowl** and **Sugar Bowl** as football terms show high scores by everyone. It might be thought that football is an important and amusing event for Americans. However, most of the expressions here are regrettably already obsolete.

Conclusion

Sport as popular culture was formed by the masses in America. Baseball and football are good examples, as they developed into American national games. Moreover, they produced derivative meanings of words from food. For instance, **steak league** meant a major league; **hamburger league** meant a minor league; these were expressions which represented the most Americanized food. As we saw in the investigation, some expressions here have become obsolete, while others have survived. This is because language is alive. Even if there are such expressions in dictionaries or books, they are no longer commonly used as living English. Language is changing all the time.

NOTES

1. This is a revised version of a paper, "Sports Through Food Words in America" presented in Japanese at Nagoya Gengo Kenkyukai, Sugiyama Jogakuen University on April 30, 1994.
2. Inge, M. Thomas. *Concise Histories of American Popular Culture*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982. p. 443
3. —. *Handbook of American Popular Culture*. Vol. 1. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978. xxxv
4. *Ibid.*, xxxv
5. *Ibid.*, xxxvi
6. Morris, Desmond. *Manwatching: Anthropology in Everyday Life*. Voll. II. Tokyo: Kinseido, 1991. p. 54
7. *Ibid.*, p. 57
8. Kung, David. *An American Story*. Tokyo: Kinseido, 1978. p. 22
9. 山田政美 『アメリカ英語文化の背景』 研究社、1991. p. 74

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Chapman, Robert L. *A New Dictionary of American Slang*. London: Pan Books, 1988.
- Partridge, Eric. *A Concise Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*. Ed. Paul Beagle. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- The Oxford English Dictionary*. London: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Webster's Sports Dictionary*. Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1976.
- Inge, M. Thomas. *Concise Histories of American Popular Culture*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982.
- . *Handbook of American Popular Culture* Vol. 1. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978.
- Kung, David. *An American Story*. Tokyo: Kinseido, 1978.
- Morris, Desmond. *Manwatching: Anthropology in Everyday Life*. Vol. II. Tokyo: Kinseido, 1991.
- 亀井俊介 『アメリカ』 (新潮社、1992)。
- 川成洋、吉岡栄一 『英語おもしろ知識』 (三修社、1985)。
- 清水知久 『アメリカの大衆文化：ポップの蜜と毒』 (明石書店、1992)。
- 常磐新平他編 『アメリカ情報コレクション』 (講談社、1992)。
- 山田政美 『アメリカ英語文化の背景』 (研究社出版、1991)。