

Lunch is What Spaceships Do . . .

by

Mark J. Dial

Many times I have moved from one house to the next, one town to another, but the transition never included changing the meaning of words. At one point in my life I actually thought *dinner*¹ and *supper*² could be interchanged when referring to the evening meal; but oh, how tragically wrong I was. I recall the first realization of my mistake like it was yesterday. This led to my discovery of an ancient plot to starve the world and Mrs. Gump's³ ongoing struggle against her fashionable enemies. My mother had just recently met the man who was to become my stepfather, David. He seemed like an okay guy. We got along well. He let me play with his chainsaw, and in exchange, I taught him how to flatten a tool shed with an oak tree.

One afternoon my stomach began to growl. David and I had spent that morning proving humans' superiority to trees. So, I casually asked if he would like to join me for lunch,⁴ but little did I know that this oft-heard question was meaningless to a wise man like David. He stared in confusion, as if to say, "What is this *lunch* you speak of?" I contemplated his bewildered look, thinking he had not heard my question. I repeated the request and was once again met with a similar expression.

"What?" David said.

"You want to go get a sandwich," I said clarifying the meaning of my previous question.

"Oh, you want to get some dinner," he replied. I then returned one of his confused looks.

This man was at least twenty years my senior, and nobody had ever explained to him that dinner was the meal after lunch? Or was it the other way around? Had I been misled my entire life? Was there a worldwide conspiracy attempting to insert a meaningless word into the English language? Had my own mother deceived me for my entire young life? If dinner was lunch, what was dinner? Did an evening meal even exist? All of these were very valid questions when it came to the pleasure a meal brings to my stomach. David was very wise in the ways of gastrointestinal pleasantries, and he was able to operate effectively a weapon of deciduous destruction. Who was I to argue with his claim, for I had yet to change the oil in my car? However, I could flatten sheds with falling chunks of nature, so I thought my upcoming question deserved an answer, if there was one.

"So, if lunch is dinner, what is dinner?" I asked him, not realizing the stupidity of my inquisition. David, being sure to make his answer as stupid as my question, explained that dinner was dinner and lunch was what spaceships did after the countdown. I, feeling like the human body part compressed when sitting, was careful not to trip over my tongue with the next question.

"Let me get this straight: dinner is the afternoon meal, lunch is what spaceships do. So, what is the evening meal called?"

"Supper!" he replied, looking at me like I was an abused child.

"But supper is dinner," I said with a quivering lip and glassy eyes.

"No, son, dinner is in the afternoon, supper is at night, and before you ask, breakfast is at sunrise," he said, confident that this was the final blow needed to convince me of my verbal inferiority.

I was overcome with sadness and embarrassment, for I had spent my entire young life

unable to describe properly the daily gatherings for consumption of food. It was a tough job, but I had to discover the true meanings of *supper* and *dinner*. I had to save the human race from starvation. It was my responsibility to every other person on earth who feels it necessary to describe his or her meals properly.

I decided to start my exploration with the words' historical uses. *Dinner* has often been thought to be the largest meal of the day. It was originally eaten around noon, its purpose being to tide agricultural workers' appetites until the end of the day (Crowley 94). Eating a large and lengthy meal also allowed the workers to rest (Crowley 94). The confusion did not begin until the reign of Henry VIII. Henry sometimes felt it necessary to eat dinner at ten in the morning; perhaps the beheading of his wives worked up an early appetite (Crowley 94). However, we cannot place full blame on him; we have Queen Victoria and her pursuit of fashion to thank as well. She thought it stylish to eat her dinner as late as 10:00 PM and further added to the mix teatime, which was created to tide the afternoon's hunger pains (Crowley 94). Perhaps if she had had a dietitian, none of this would have happened, as many now believe it is unhealthy to eat such a large meal so close to bedtime. I cannot dismiss the power of fashion, though; if Ralph Lauren thought it fashionable to interrupt sleep and eat dinner at 3:00 AM, the public would gladly comply in the name of popularity. I, however, am not willing to pay extra for Eddie Bauer⁵ to autograph my jacket, so when you come to my house dinner will remain in its original place at noon.

Supper came about as the name for the evening meal when lunchtime was referred to as *dinner* (Crowley 94). I believe I speak for country folk everywhere when I say:

Us uncivilized country folk who work in fields all day don't have no use for lunch. When we is hungry in the afternoon we want a big meal, so we have dinner. Ane when we set down after a day in the fields we want supper. And we know we is right cause them city people don't have breakfast or dinner. They is so confused they sit down about 10:30 in the morning and eat brunch.

As Forrest Gump's momma said one evening, "It's supper time, Forrest. Ya'll come and eat" (*Forrest Gump*). If Forrest Gump's momma thinks *supper* is the proper name for the evening meal, I am not going to argue with her.

Seeing that this has been a topic debated for centuries, I decided to get some more recent opinions of the meanings of *supper* and *dinner*. In hopes of including a more diverse population, I chose rural and urban interviewees. City folk seemed puzzled by my questions and often resorted to laughter when my inquiries went over their heads. However, some were more cooperative and saved their snickers until I had departed. They disagreed with Mrs. Gump and thought the evening meal was called *dinner* (Informal Interviews). They also believed that *lunch* was the proper term to use when referring to the afternoon meal (Dial). Most of them were wearing Calvin Kleins,⁶ though, and if we trusted him for dietary advice, X-ray machines would be out of service. My previous historical discoveries, along with Calvin's skeletal fetish, clearly discredit the city slickers' opinions regarding food. Interviewing the urbanites did little to answer my questions. However, I had yet to interview David's mom, provider of the meals my stepfather held so close to his heart, so all was not lost.

As I sat down for the evening supper at my grandmother's home, I was told that the word *lunch* was derived from *luncheon*. After supper, while watching *Forrest Gump*, she continued her explanation. She told me that *to lunch* was used in the early nineteenth century to describe a

person with a fashionable affectation (Dial). When I later compared my grandmother's account to those of the city folks, the cause of confusion became clear. The fashion industry and its royal cohorts were responsible for an ancient plot to confuse us into starvation, but thanks to the wisdom of Mrs. Gump and the rule about respecting your elders, I can now reveal their plans.

With the help of Mrs. Gump, I have uncovered a massive controversy in exploring the definitions of *supper* and *dinner*. If left unsolved, this controversy might lead to hunger across the globe. If we can't decide which bell to ring for which meal, we might starve in our indecision. However, I think I have solved the problem. I have discovered that Queen Victoria was responsible for this confusion. So, if we overthrow the British government, we can change their recorded history. Essentially, we can rewrite the history books and leave the trouble-making queen out. When we rewrite the books, we can void her influence and return dinner to its proper place in the middle of the day. *Dinner* once again will be used for the midday meal, and the only word left to label the evening meal would be *supper*. Urbanites, continuing their tradition of letting others do their thinking, will gladly accept this change in the name of popularity. And *lunch* will forever remain what spaceships do.

Endnotes

1. "Dinner." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. The chief meal of the day, eaten originally, and still by the majority of people, about the middle of the day (cf. Ger. *Mittagsessen*), but now, by the professional and fashionable classes, usually in the evening; particularly, a formally arranged meal of various courses; a repast given publicly in honour of someone, or to celebrate some event.
2. "Supper." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. Formerly, the last of the three meals of the day (breakfast, dinner, and supper); now applied to the last substantial meal of the day when dinner is taken in the middle of the day, or to a late meal following an early evening dinner. Supper is usually a less formal meal than late dinner.
3. Character portrayed by actress Sally Field in the movie *Forrest Gump*.
4. "Lunch." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1991. (Perh. evolved from lump sb.1, on the analogy of the apparent relation between *hump* and *hunch*, *bump* and *bunch*.) Cf. 'Lounge, a large lump, as of bread or cheese' (Brockett, *N. Country Words*, 2nd ed. 1829). It is curious that the word first appears as a rendering of the (at that time) like-sounding Sp. *Lonja*, slice of ham. Luncheon, commonly believed to be a derivative of *lunch*, occurs in our quotes eleven years earlier, with its present spelling. In sense 2, *lunch* was an abbreviation of *luncheon*, first appearing about 1829, when it was regarded either as a vulgarism or as a fashionable affectation.
5. Eddie Bauer and Ralph Lauren are famous fashion designers of the 20th century.
6. Another famous fashion designer of the 20th century.

Works Cited

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