The University of British Columbia

Usage Project Final Report - Dinner/Supper

ENGL 321
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Introduction:

In contemporary North American society, people often grow up familiar with describing their meals for the day as breakfast, lunch, and dinner in chronological order. Breakfast makes for the morning meal, lunch describes the meal taken in the noontime or afternoon period, dinner is what we call our evening meals. However, if one examines the history of naming our meals, an interesting discrepancy emerges; the evening meal was not always known as "dinner". According to the *Guide to Canadian English Usage* by Margery Fee and Janice MacAlpine (2011), the term "dinner" used to refer to a different meal eaten at a different time. Dinner was a large meal at noon for those working in heavy labor during the day, as its timing allowed for them to make use of the energy and nutrition effectively while burning off any excess. Instead of "dinner", the term "supper" was used to denote the evening meal. Unlike the large portions and servings of the midday dinner meal, the evening supper was a light meal intended to curb any cravings and let one's body settle down to relax before the night. Examining usage guides also yields that temperature matters in the usage of "dinner" and "supper", as the former denotes a warmer, heavier meal while the latter denotes a colder, lighter meal.

Nowadays, these meanings have changed as people's lifestyles have developed and working hours have become more variable. We were interested in seeing how contemporary usage of both terms played out in usage across Canada as well as in America and Great Britain. In order to scrutinize the regional variation between these three countries, which belong to the "inner circle" of English due to it being their primary language, our research question looks to explore how frequent the meaning behind "dinner" and "supper" differs in each region. We will be analyzing from both usage guides and data collected and compiled from online sources within corpora after

1950. Our group hypothesizes that contemporary occurrences of "dinner" will refer to evening meals more frequently than day meals, while "supper" will refer more to day meals.

Methods:

In order to find, collect, and annotate our data for our project, we made a decision as a group to consult both physical and digital sources. We first investigated the university's library for usage guides in print format, and after scouring through the listings we settled on the *Guide to Canadian English Usage (CEU)* and *Garner's Modern English Usage Guide (MEU).* In the CEU, dinner and supper are distinguished by the fact that dinner refers to a substantial, warm meal, and supper refers to a relatively lighter and colder meal. On the other hand, the MEU mentions some historical context in an essay which categorizes the words' usage in the past into upper class and non-upper class usages. The meaning of "dinner" used historically ("midday meal") was attributed to the non-upper classes. The upper classes generally used the term "lunch" to describe their midday meals, and this still holds true today for all social classes. In contrast, the upper class have used both dinner/supper for describing their "evening meals". Although not our main focus of research, this distinction between formal/informal setting affects usage and will be annotated for to further examine discrepancies in our samples. Both of these usage guides we deem the most relevant to our research question as they focus on the development of the contemporary English language.

Our group then turned towards electronic and digital sources for further data. Utilising the English Corpora database compiled by Mark Davies at Brigham Young University in Utah, we will use three corpora to search for examples of our words' usage. As we are studying regional

variation in the inner circle countries of Canada, Britain, and the United States, there is a corpus for each one. These are the *British National Corpus* (BNC), the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) and the *Strathy Corpus of Canadian English* (Strathy). The BNC will provide our data for British English, the COCA will provide examples for American English to supplement Garner's usage guide, and Strathy will provide evidence for the usage of dinner and supper as discussed in *Canadian English Usage*. All three of these corpora cover a similar time span, and are balanced enough between various mediums to acquire a sufficient amount of diverse samples for each region.

To search for our data, the search terms we will use will be "dinner" and "supper" as these are the two words with which our research concerns. Our searches in each of the three aforementioned corpora will allow us to see and compare the usage context between these two words in various regions. In the process, our group also aims to see whether there is a "class distinction" that presides over these words' usage as Bryan Garner suggests in his usage guide. In practice, our data collection is going to involve random sampling from 100 samples in each corpus as there is a broad variety of mediums and genres in which "dinner" and "supper" feature in. Each group member will be tasked with examining one of the corpuses. The annotation of the collected data will be conducted through a Google Sheets shared document, where each sample will be pasted in with an annotation explaining its meaning and usage beside it.

As a group, we will split the workload of gathering samples between all three of us to be as efficient and fair as possible. After selecting our corpuses, we will each search up "dinner" and "supper" on their databases, sampling 100 entries for both terms. We will then create a

spreadsheet for each term as it relates to its respective corpus, leaving us with two each to annotate and analyze and six in total. In order to account for diversity in usage, we made sure that our samples were from as many different genres as possible when cycling through the sampling lists on each corpus's page.

Through our examination of the two usage guides, we will be looking for two meanings in the usages of both "dinner" and "supper". "Day/Evening" will be the primary meaning and "Hot/Cold" (or heavy/light meal) will be the secondary meaning. "Day" would be suggested based on explicit references to a time before the afternoon. "Evening" would be implied based on common knowledge that parties and other social gatherings, as well as meals for children after school generally occur post-afternoon and even into the nighttime. "Hot" would be understood based on contextual phrases like "cooking" or anything to do with heat as well as size (e.g. party or Church meals) while "cold" would be pointed to through the absence of heating elements, the presence of freezing, or references to a "quick" or "small" meal. The "Expanded Context" feature in each corpus will be used to better understand each entry and figure out meaning.
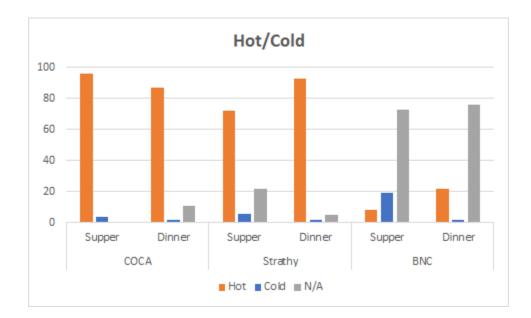
Final Results:

In the cases where an entry had one meaning but not another or neither meaning at all, they were annotated as "N/A" or not available. Such cases we found to be ambiguous or used the term in a way that was unconventional. This was the case with words such as "Dinner table", which compounded "dinner" with another word and therefore altered the meaning of "dinner" in that specific context. One does not have to be eating a meal, hot or cold, to be able to sit at a dinner table, nor do they have to be doing it at a specific time of day. As a group, we decided not

to leave out such entries as they were indicators of alternative usages or occurrences of "dinner" and "supper" that had not been previously discussed in usage guides and were worth noting for their uniqueness.

"Hot/Cold" Table:

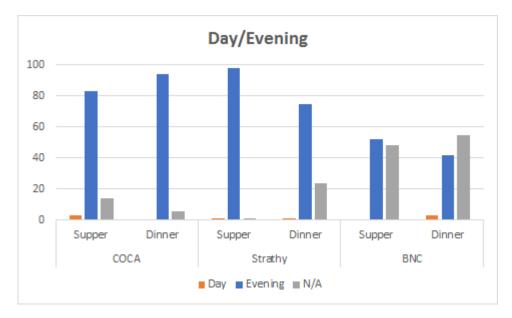| Hot/Cold	COCA		Strathy		BNC	
	Supper	Dinner	Supper	Dinner	Supper	Dinner
Hot	96	87	72	93	8	22
Cold	4	2	6	2	19	2
N/A	0	11	22	5	73	76

"Hot/Cold" Bar Graph

Notes on Hot/Cold Results: For COCA and Strathy, the majority of the results for both Supper and Dinner are "Hot" meals, as opposed to "Cold". In the BNC, Supper and Dinner exhibit a distinction between Hot and Cold. 22 out of the 100 samples of Dinner that are not annotated as N/A are "Hot", whereas only 2 are "Cold". Similarly, while only eight samples of "Supper" entries indicate a "Hot" meal, the frequency of "Cold" Supper is more than double (19) of that of "Hot" Supper.

"Day/Evening" Table

Day/Evening	COCA		Strathy		BNC	
	Supper	Dinner	Supper	Dinner	Supper	Dinner
Day	3	0	1	1	0	3
Evening	83	94	98	75	52	42
N/A	14	6	1	24	48	55

"Day/Evening" Bar Graph

Notes on Day/Evening Results: Again for COCA and Strathy, the majority of entries for both "Dinner" and "Supper" refer to a meal taking place in the evening. However, for the BNC, there are again different results with there being about a 50/50 split between "Evening" and N/A. Overall; there were very few "Day" occurrences in the entries our group sampled, if any at all.

Discussion:

Our analysis of 300 samples of "dinner" and 300 samples of "supper" across three regionally distinct corpora illustrate that evening was the most prominent meaning behind each use of either term. The COCA and Strathy Corpora, both covering regions within North America, conveyed "dinner" and "supper" frequently as evening meals through details such as time of day or situational phrases such as "parties" and "after work". On the other hand, the BNC, a European corpus, had notably more ambiguous entries alongside entries where "evening" was the intended usage. For example, this entry: "...been spotted.' Goodbye, Mrs Robson." Goodbye, lad.' Her voice had a sad note to it and he knew that she was standing at the gate watching him as he rode away. He again knew what it was to feel embarrassed when, on the Monday **dinner** time, he went into the NAAM, and looking at her over the counter, he said,' Hello there,' and she answered,' Hello, yourself.' The perky waitress was back.' Tea or coffee? Take your choice, there's not much difference". This entry features dinner as part of the phrase "dinner time", and without any explicit clues in the dialogue it is unclear when dinner time actually is for the people speaking.

There are four entries where we find that "dinner" refers to a meal during the day, one from Strathy and three from BNC. Their genres were fiction (Strathy) and biography, newspaper, and

conversation (BNC). Going back to our inquiry into Garner's explanation that historically, social settings have had an effect on the meanings of "dinner" vs "supper", this result is interesting. These four genres are informal contexts, and the target readers are the general public and not a professional or academic audience. Although the word "dinner" used in these entries does not refer to the same "dinner" historically denoting consumption during the day necessary for heavy labor, we find that "day" dinner remains a meaning of the word that sees use in casual settings but not at all in formal, "upper-class" contexts.

As for the temperature or type of meal, "Hot" was generally the implied or explicit meaning in most entries for the COCA and Strathy Corpus. The sample entries taken from the BNC were yet again ambiguous in their context and it was harder to pinpoint meaning compared to the other two corpora. For example, in this entry: "he did not want to think about it. He took Emmie's arm.' Sit down, pet, have a cup of tea." I feel a bit sick' Emmie said. She smiled , a fixed, bright smile.' I'll find Oliver and tell him **supper**'s ready.' Emmie ran across the fields to the pits, towel and bathing suit flapping from her arm. She was going to swim in the lake, alone, because both Nick and her father had expressly forbidden it. An act of defiance was her only defense, not so…". This sentence does not establish what kind of meal "supper" is, nor does it suggest anything about the time of day this event occurs. We cannot know without the full context from which this sample was taken from. Another example was this entry: "...as cycle clothing and is a main agent for Peugeot, Kirk, Cadex, Giant and Viking. O'Neill Cycles also hires bikes and stocks a range of exercise bikes. The shop is open 9am to 6pm daily. # Easy way to party success # ENTERTAINING -- whether a formal party or **dinner** for a few friends -- is something which most people enjoy. What better way to spend an evening or Sunday lunch than sitting down with

congenial company and enjoying good food. Until now this final result involved time and effort on the part of the host. From shopping to chopping to cooking…". Here, we can see that there is mention of evening, but also daytime with "Sunday lunch". It is not clear whether "dinner" refers to one time or the other in this sentence. Despite the greater amount of ambiguities present in the BNC, the entries where meaning was clear from the context illustrated that "Supper" was mostly used to refer to "Cold" meals while "Dinner" was reserved for "Hot" ones in the British usage of both terms.

Conclusion:

The results of our data analysis reveal that our hypothesis was correct in regards to the increasing frequency of "dinner" referring to evening meals. However, "supper" was also found to be relatively common in its reference to an evening meal. Our samples across the COCA, Strathy Corpus, and the BNC indicate that the usage of dinner to describe a "day" meal historically used in the pre-modern period has disappeared in most cases, although the cases where it does appear in remain the same as they were before. As for the "Hot/Cold" meal distinction, all of the Corpora heavily feature the usage of both "dinner" and "supper" to describe a ready-made and warm meal. Only in the British National Corpus does this distinction appear occasionally, with a cold or light supper meal being more prominent in entries than a warm and heavy supper meal.

The results of our research and analysis support the descriptivist linguistic model of the English language as changing and developing over time, as "dinner" and "supper" have now mostly become synonymous with one another in common usages and meanings across the inner circle

regions we examined. Future research and inquiries into this distinction would have us take samples from more regions within the inner circle, and perhaps some in the outer circle. It would also better account for why ambiguities showed up, and what that suggested about a term's usage. We would also explore the collocations and additional contextual meanings which were re-occurring in usages of "dinner" and "supper", such as the "dinner party" or "supper club" to see how the meanings of the terms changed in relation to their inclusion as part of such phrases. Another possible avenue of research would be to examine our local Vancouver population's usage of "dinner" and "supper" and compare their frequency and meanings in relation to an American city such as Los Angeles due to the similarities we observed between the Canada and United States corpora.

Overall, as a group we are satisfied with our analysis and believe that we have answered our research question, which asked how frequent meanings differed between "dinner" and "supper" in the inner circle regions. In the process, we have developed a newfound awareness and appreciation for how we describe our daily meals, as well as how that has changed as a result of time and societal trends.

References:

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