
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

The language of biscuits



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Rob

And I'm Rob.

Neil

In this programme, we're talking about biscuits!

Rob

Biscuits – a subject very close to my heart – something important to me and that interests me.

Neil

I know, Rob. You are a biscuit connoisseur after all. And in the UK, many of us love to nibble on these sweet treats. And we have lots of names for them too.

Rob

Yes, we have the chocolate digestive, the garibaldi, the custard cream and the jammie dodger. It's making my mouth water.

Neil

I can see. But we're not going to be tucking into any biscuits today. Instead, we'll be looking at the origins and the language of this humble snack. And before we do that, Rob, let's test your knowledge of biscuits with a question. The British aren't the only fans of biscuits. So in which country are barazeks traditionally eaten? Is it in...

- a) Syria
- b) Morocco, or
- c) Spain?

Rob

Hmmm, well I have not eaten one, but I'll have a guess at Syria.

Neil

OK, I'll reveal the right answer later on. But now, let's talk more about biscuits, also sometimes known as cookies. They come in all shapes, sizes and varieties.

Rob

They can be sweet or savoury – but I prefer the sweet ones that are crisp, crunchy and are good for dunking in my tea. **Dunking** means dipping into liquid for a short period of time.

Neil

But enough about your eating habits, Rob. Let's find out how the biscuit got its name. It's something the BBC Radio 4 programme Word of Mouth has been exploring. Dr Laura Wright, a historical linguist from the University of Cambridge, explains its origins...

Dr Laura Wright, historical linguist, University of Cambridge

From Latin 'biscoctum' – twice cooked. And it comes to us via Anglo-Norman French, but it's bread that's been cooked twice to extract all the moisture so that it goes hard, and it'll stay **fit for consumption** for a very long time, which is why you can take it to sea and have a sea biscuit... and from the 1500 at least we spelt it like it sounds 'bisket'... but at some point, in the 1800, we started to prefer the French spelling for reasons of poncy-ness!

Neil

So, the English word for biscuits has its origins in Latin. It describes cooking bread twice to make it hard. This baking process meant a biscuit could be kept for a long time, and as Dr Wright said, it would stay **fit for consumption** – another way of saying '**edible**' or able to be eaten.

Rob

That's why they were taken on long sea voyages – but they weren't like the biscuits we eat now – they were plain, simple and very hard baked. Interestingly, the word biscuit used to be spelt B-I-S-K-E-T but the French spelling B-I-S-C-U-I-T was later adopted.

Neil

Biscuits are a handy go-to snack for when I'm hungry or bored. But how did biscuits become such a popular foodstuff and how did we come to depend on them so much?

Rob

It's something Anastasia Edwards, author of *Biscuits and Cookies, A Global History*, talked about in the Word of Mouth programme. Listen to the word she uses to mean 'food' in her explanation...

Anastasia Edwards, author

One key fact in the rise in the popularity of the biscuit is meal times. Before the Industrial Revolution, people have a later breakfast and earlier supper. By the end of the Industrial Revolution, breakfast is much earlier, the evening meal is much later, so you've got this big gap of time where people need **sustenance**, and so lunch comes to greater **prominence** and tea time comes to greater prominence, and snacking – so there's this great opportunity for biscuits – something small, something ready, something easily consumable, not expensive, you know, a bit of a **sugar rush**.

Neil

Right, so it was the Industrial Revolution that led to the rise – that's the increase – in the popularity of biscuits. Because the time between breakfast and dinner in the evening increased, people got hungry and they needed food to give them energy – what Anastasia called **sustenance**.

Rob

So, this is when smaller meals, such as lunch or tea, became important or more well-known – it had greater **prominence**. And this included snacking on biscuits. These were cheap and easily **consumable** – easy and quick to eat. And because of their ingredients, they gave you a **sugar rush** - a quick blast of energy.

Neil

Of course, now, we eat biscuits at any time, and because of their sugar content, we know to only eat them in moderation – Rob!

Rob

I think a packet a day is fine – but a whole box, well, that would really take the biscuit!

Neil

Take the biscuit! Good idiom there, Rob, to mean 'be the most foolish, annoying or surprising thing to do'. But now let's find out the answer to my quiz question. Earlier, I asked which country are barazeks traditionally eaten in?

Rob

And I thought Syria. Was I right?

Neil

Yes, you were. Well done. You are a smart cookie!
Barazeks are biscuits filled with roasted sesame seeds and pistachio chips.

Rob

They sound delicious. I would love to try some.

Neil

OK, well we've been discussing the language of biscuits and mentioned some of these words. **Dunking** describes dipping something, like a biscuit, into liquid for a short period of time.

Rob

Describing something as being **fit for consumption** means it is **edible** – which is another one of our words and means 'it can be eaten'.

Neil

Sustenance is another word for food. And something that has **prominence** is important or more well-known.

Rob

And when you get a **sugar rush**, you get a quick blast of energy from, unsurprisingly, eating something containing lots of sugar.

Neil

OK, well, we only get six minutes for this programme – that's the way the cookie crumbles – so we're out of time. Bye for now.

Rob

Goodbye.

VOCABULARY

dunking

dipping something, like a biscuit, into liquid for a short period of time

fit for consumption

edible or can be eaten

edible

can be eaten

sustenance

food

prominence

important or well-known

sugar rush

get a quick blast of energy