A Linguistic History of Things Other than Food that People Have Put into Their Mouths

1488. Toothpicks are referred to for the first time in the English language, in a royal inventory compiled by the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland: “Twa tuthpikis of gold with a chenyghe.” Toothpicks made from precious substances were, it seems, both a fashionable and functional accessory for those who could afford them. A treatise published in 1600, entitled *Natural and Artificial Directions for Health*, advised readers to “make cleane your teeth with your toothpicker, which should be either of ivorie, silver, or gold.” Some of these toothpicks were highly ornamented: an English toothpick, dating from the early seventeenth century, features a tiny arm made from enamelled gold and set with a ruby; the hand of the arm holds the toothpick proper, which is also fashioned of gold and curved like a scythe, while the elbow of the arm has been carved to resemble a death’s head. Wearing a toothpick around one’s neck appears to have been an affectation that the smart set soon abandoned. Parolles, in Shakespeare’s *All’s Well that Ends Well*, tells Helena that “virginitie, like an olde courtier, weares her cap out of fashion, richly suited, but unsuiteable, just like the brooch and the toothpick, which wear not now.”

1684. The term “artificial teeth” appears in print for the first time in an advertisement in the *London Gazette*. The teeth in question were probably made from ivory or bone, as opposed to “real” replacement teeth that were extracted from cadavers or living donors (who were paid a fee for their pearly whites). The term “false teeth” appeared in 1795, followed in the early nineteenth century by “mineral paste teeth” and “porcelain teeth,” which denoted sets made from ceramic. The early nineteenth century also saw English adopt “ratelier”—a French word meaning “rack”—as a name for a set of false teeth. “Dentures” appeared in 1874, “tatts” (which is found mostly in Australia) in 1912, and “snappers” in 1924. “Polygriptic,” denoting the condition of requiring dentures, emerged in the late twentieth century.

1709. English acquires “chaw” as a name for a lump of chewing tobacco. Ten years later English speakers also invented the synonymous “quid,” which likely developed as a variant of “cud.” The practice of chewing tobacco was probably introduced to Europeans by the indigenous peoples of South America: in 1500, on an island near Venezuela, Columbus encountered Native Americans chewing a mixture of green leaves and crushed mussel shells. The crushed shells presumably caused small cuts in the cheek, allowing the nicotine to enter the bloodstream more quickly; today, some manufacturers of chewing tobacco put grit and microscopic fiberglass into their product for the same reason. As the practice of chewing tobacco spread, so did the practice of burning tobacco leaves and inhaling the smoke. This, though, was called “drinking” the smoke: “He was drinking a pipe of Tobacco,” writes Edward Johnson in 1654, a usage that persisted in English into the eighteenth century, and which still persists in languages such as Hindi and Egyptian Arabic.

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1832. The word “toothpaste” appears in the English language in an ad in *The American Railroad Journal*. These commercial products were surely a welcome alternative to earlier homemade teeth cleaners: in 1819, for example, *The Family Receipt Book* recommended rubbing one’s teeth with a few grains of gunpowder to give teeth “an incomparable whiteness.” Gunpowder, though, might have been more effective than the sugar that was included in recipes for teeth cleansers from the sixteenth century. Still earlier, the ancient Romans sometimes added human urine to their teeth cleansers, presumably because urine contains tooth-whitening ammonia. Fortunately, they also added pleasantly aromatic substances, including flower petals and herbs such as spikenard. The earliest references to toothpastes date back five thousand years to the ancient Egyptians, who concocted a mixture of powdered bone, egg shells, and oyster shells that they scrubbed against their teeth with the frayed and softened end of a twig.

1850. “Chewing gum” appears for the first time in a newspaper advertisement in a Chicago newspaper. Previously, Americans had called that product “spruce gum” after the spruce tree resin from which it was made. The first person to mass produce spruce gum was John Curtis, who in 1848 began selling “The State of Maine Pure Spruce Gum.” Maine, in fact, became so associated with the mastication of spruce resin that in 1880 its governor, Alonzo Garcelon, described “the use of tobacco as not less disgusting than the habit of gum-chewing, so prevalent among certain classes of the community.” The *New York Times* responded to the Governor’s comments with a somewhat gum-in-cheek article that described how “pupils in the public schools, so justly the pride of Maine, chew surreptitiously and behind their slates, borrowing from each other and returning not again the cud which deludes the chewer with a vague sense that he is eating something.” Around the same time, John Russell Bartlett included the phrase “He doesn’t know enough to chew gum” in his *Dictionary of Americanisms*. Americans acquired the practice of chewing spruce gum from Native Americans. Before that, in Europe and the Middle East, people had chewed a gum made from the resin of the mastic shrub for at least two thousand years.

1865. The word “gamahuche,” denoting the act of orally stimulating the penis, enters the English language. It is followed in 1887 by “fellatio” and “cunnilingus,” while “oral sex” does not appear until 1950. Much earlier references to these sexual acts can be found in other cultures. The Greek poet Archilochus of Paros, for example, descanted upon fellatio in the seventh century BCE: “Like a Thracian or Phrygian drinking beer through a tube, she sucked, stooped down, engaged too from behind.” In the fifth century BCE, Aristophanes derided Arignotus for his “novel forms of self-pollution, bestial tricks unknown before: in the brothels, of prostitutes he licks up the loathsome slime, he befouls his bearded mouth with filth and dirt from their cunts.”

1893. “Nail-biter” appears as a name for someone afflicted with nervousness. The act of biting or chewing one’s fingernails had, of course, been practiced ever since humans decided to turn their front legs into arms. In the sixteenth century, it was considered an indication that the nibbler was in deep thought, or as the author of *Chirologia Or The Natural Language of the Hand* put it in 1644, “The finger in the mouth gnawn and sucked is a gesture of serious and deep meditation.” Similarly, the ancient Romans considered chewing one’s fingernails to be the sign of intense cogitation, especially by poets. Horace, for example, claims that Lucilius, one of his satirical predecessors, would have to have “scratched his head, and bit his nails to the quick” if he wanted to write as well as “modern” poets. In some cultures, biting a finger or nail has also signified ill will. In *Romeo and Juliet* Sampson tells Gregory, “I will bite my thumb at them; which is a disgrace to them, if they bear it.”

1903. “Dummy” appears in print as the name of an India-rubber nipple used to soothe babies, followed by “pacifier” in 1904. Despite these two new names, artificial nipple technology failed to advance: a contributor to the 1906 *Chemist and Druggist Journal* lamented that “There has been little progress in the shape of the ‘dummy teat.’” Nonetheless, by the 1920s pacifiers had gained such popularity that health practitioners began to worry about their long-term effect on the physical and psychological well-being of children. The *London Times* reported, in 1921, that “To discourage the use of the ‘dummy’ as a baby-soother, the Infant Welfare Centre at Tring gave prizes to all babies who had not used it and placed their names on a roll of honour.” This passage, incidentally, also marks the first appearance of “soother” as a synonym for “dummy” and “pacifier.”