



THE CORNBREAD QUESTION

WHAT DO YOU CALL IT?

by Allison Burkette

OFTEN I AM ASKED HOW linguists research the ways in which different people use language. The long answer has to do with collecting data and doing theoretically grounded analysis, perhaps even some correlational statistics. The short answer is simple, and perhaps more elegant: We ask them.

In the late 1920s, a group of American linguists undertook what is to date the largest survey of American English ever conducted. They called it the Linguistic Atlas Project and began by interviewing speakers in New England. After they completed the New England survey, they moved down the East Coast, creating the Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States (LAMSAS, for short).

LAMSAS fieldworkers Raven McDavid and Guy Lowman talked to

over 1,100 people over the course of the 1930s and 1940s, spending six to eight hours with each informant. They wrote down answers to the interview questions in International Phonetic Alphabet, a set of symbols that can be used to precisely document speech sounds. McDavid and Lowman asked each interviewee about 800 questions—yes, eight *hundred*—most having to do with words for things commonly found around the house and farm. They asked questions using a shotgun-style technique: long questions aimed at eliciting a short answer, followed by a set of lengthy follow-up questions gauged to hit an even wider target.

Here's an example of a basic question: *What is baked in a large cake made of cornmeal?*

And here's a not-so-basic set of follow-ups (McDavid was famous

Denny Culbert

THE LAMSAS SURVEY RETURNED OVER 390 DISTINCT ANSWERS TO THE CORNBREAD QUESTION. THAT'S A LOT OF WORDS FOR CORNBREAD.

for these, this one in particular):

Now, you mention cornbread.

What do you mean by cornbread?

Do you have more than one kind?

Suppose you have the kind that doesn't have anything in it except cornmeal, salt, and water? What do you call that?

Do you ever remember any kind of cornbread that people talked about making before the fire on a board or something like that, only larger?

Are there kinds that they cook in ashes?

What kind is about an inch thick, very large and round?

And sort of like a sphere and maybe it has a little bit of onion or green pepper mixed up in it and you cook them in deep fat and eat them with fish or other fried seafood?

There is something else that you sometimes have that you boil in cheesecloth with either beans or greens or something with chicken, made out of cornmeal. What would you call that?

And then there's the kind of cornmeal that you cook in a deep pan and it comes out soft and you dish it out like you would dish out mashed potatoes onto your plate beside your meat.

Even given the breadth of McDavid's follow-up questions about cornbread, it still may surprise you to know that the LAMSAS survey returned over 390 distinct answers to the cornbread question.

Some of the terms are regional, some are local, and some are individual. Some terms reflect a particular method of cornbread preparation, like "hoe cakes," which are made out in the field when dough is baked over a fire atop a wiped-down hoe. Some terms carry with them their cultural origins, such as "pone" (Native American), "ponhaus" (Pennsylvania Deutsch), and "bannock" (Scottish), just to name a few. Some terms reflect the addition of other ingredients, like meat scraps ("crackling bread") or eggs ("eggbread").

I can come up with reasons for, histories of, or background stories for a lot of the terms, but that many cornbread variations are hard to explain. I've not run across another Linguistic Atlas question that elicited as many terms as the cornbread question did. It's a testament to the cultural import of this foundational food. 🍞