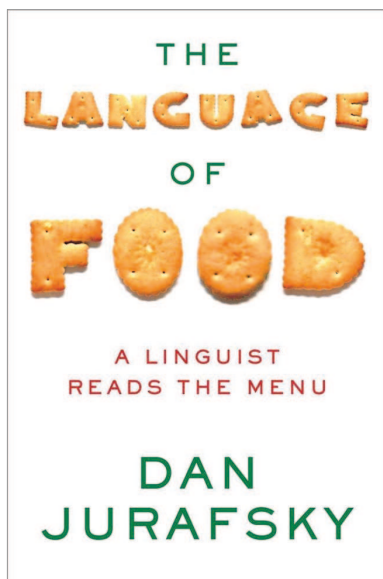# Reviews

THE LANGUAGE OF FOOD. A LINGUIST READS THE MENU
Dan Jurafsky
W.W. Norton & Company, 2014, 246 pages, RRP £15.58 (hardcover).

Ana Tominc

The Language of Food is linguist Dan Jurafsky's first book for a lay audience. A compilation of some of his previously published articles and new corpus studies into food menus, food reviews and recipes, this book is a delightful read for anyone interested in language and what it tells us about food. Over the course of thirteen chapters, it offers insights into why we call a drinking a 'toast' after a slice of bread, how to recognise an expensive restaurant by only reading its menu and why a brand of dark beer should be called Usab rather than Esab.

Several chapters discuss the culinary history of various words linked to food and eating, such as 'ketchup', 'turkey', 'salsa', 'macaroon' and 'macaron', 'sherbet' and 'entrée'. By examining the language histories and development of these, Jurafsky demonstrates the influence of the Arabs, Persians, Indians, and Chinese cultures and languages on the European and American food vocabularies and food habits today. An example is 'ketchup', a word for tomato sauce that arrived in the USA with the Chinese, where preserved fish sauce is called ketchup in Hokkien, the language of Taiwan. In 18th century Britain, it still referred to a sauce containing fish, but one hundred years later, tomatoes were added for the first time, and anchovies dropped.

As a corpus linguist, Jurafsky's particular interest lies in computer-aided analysis of large numbers of naturally occurring texts related to food. With his colleagues at Stanford, he examines restaurant menus to find out whether certain words are more likely to occur on menus of more expensive or cheap restaurants: he finds that long, elaborate words, like 'decaffeinated' and 'tenderness' tend to signal an expensive restaurant, while adjectives such as 'fluffy' and 'tender' suggest a mid-price menu. Less expensive places are also more likely to use the pronoun 'you', as in 'according to your liking' or 'your choice'.

Finally, Jurafsky looks at the relationship between words and taste. He convincingly argues, following a number of studies (which were reported in the Language in the News column in Issue 5 of Babel), that in many languages words that relate to 'small' and 'thin' contain front vowels, such as those in bit and bed, while back vowels such as those in 'large' and 'pot' are associated with 'big', 'fat' and 'heavy' qualities, and – in the case of taste – 'rounded' and 'rich'. Hence, marketing researchers have concluded that when branding food it is essential to take into consideration sound symbolism and choose brand names that signify to the costumers the desired quality of the product.

The Language of Food is full of surprising facts about how language and food travel and how words are borrowed and transformed to name dishes that are familiar to us today. Written in an accessible way, this book will leave readers wanting to know more about the history of the foods names that commonly appear on our plates. As for the 'toast': until the seventeenth century, wine and ale used to be drunk with a piece of spiced bread in it: drinking to someone's health, Jurafsky tells us, "flavoured the party just as the spiced toast and herbs flavoured the wine". ¶

Ana Tominc is a lecturer in a new MSc Gastronomy programme at Queen Margaret University Edinburgh. She holds a PhD in Linguistics from Lancaster University and is specifically interested in food and communication.