Cucurbits

ORIN HARGRAVES

'The classification of the Cucurbita species is not easy to understand and the vernacular names (marrow, squash, pumpkin) have often been applied somewhat indiscriminately.'
—from the *Oxford Book of Food Plants*

THE FRUITS of the plant family *Cucurbitaceae* – variously called the gourd family, the pumpkin family, the melon family, or the cucumber family – offer rich pickings for charting the distribution of English dialectal variations and the curious ways in which they get fixed. The cucurbits are a medium-sized plant family, with representatives native to both the Old and New Worlds. They are what taxonomists call a monophyletic family, or a clade: all representatives of the family known today have a single ancestor, which presumably sprouted up somewhere on Pangaea.*

Cucurbits began differentiating themselves in the distant mists of time, and were fully formed into distinct types when humans first laid eyes on them, thus providing a signal opportunity for labeling. Some cucurbits were among the first cultivated plants known: squash in North America and some cucumbers and melons in Asia were under human cultivation thousands of years before the common era, long before English was even a twinkle in the eye of its Northern European developers Because of this, speakers of English were obliged to find consensus for tagging phenomena that speakers of other languages already had names for. The names that English speakers have settled on tell us a good deal about the influencing factors in these decisions: local conditions, other languages, and historical precedent.

Agreeing on gourds

It is always comforting to begin where there is agreement and harmony, even when these are in short supply, and so we will look first at *gourd*. Of the four general terms noted above (gourd, pumpkin, melon, cucumber), it is the oldest in English (appearing before 1300), and the one that all major dialects agree on in the technical sense: any fruit of a cucurbit or any cucurbit plant, for that matter – can be called a gourd. In its less technical usages, gourd also serves a similar purpose in most English dialects: it is commonly used for the hard-skinned varieties of cucurbit that can be dried, are not necessarily edible, and that may have any of various nonculinary uses, including mere decoration. Thus we find *apple gourd*, *bottle gourd*, *buffalo gourd*, *snake gourd*. But *gourd* is also very handy as the second term in the names of some food cucurbits whether they have a hard rind or not – e.g., *bitter gourd* (to which we shall return), *hairy gourd*, *ivy gourd*.

The distinct morphological features of cucurbit plants and fruits make it a pretty good bet

* A presumed single continent from which most geologists consider the present-day continents emerged. – Ed.

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that any native speaker of English with even limited garden exposure, when presented with a cucurbit never seen before, would feel confident in saying 'It looks like some sort of *x*,' where in place of *x* the speaker will substitute one of our four venerable terms: gourd, pumpkin, melon, or cucumber. But here our subject begins to grow complicated. If our native speaker is an American or Canadian, we must add a fifth term to our foundation set: *squash*. And if our speaker is other than American or Canadian, and if our presentation fruit is one of the quick-maturing gourds of the genus *Cucurbita*, we must add yet another term to our basic set: *marrow*. *Squash* and *marrow* have – or at least had, until very recent times – usage patterns within the Anglosphere that are pretty clearly marked along national lines, and they merit their own discussion as exemplars of English lexical variants with distinct and colorful histories.

Squash and marrow

As for *squash*: it is from Narragansett (a native American language) *askutasquash*. We may be thankful that our linguistic forebears reduced this to a familiar monosyllable. The early American speakers who were privy to the coining of this loan word succeeded admirably in making *squash* the hypernym, in North American dialects, for the broad class of edible cucurbits that grow on trailing vines and have large, pale orange flowers (that is, cucurbits of the genus *Cucurbita*). North Americans subdivide the squash into two main varieties: winter squash, the long-maturing, storable, usually orange-fleshed varieties of cucurbit (in other words, what to most other English speakers is pumpkin), and *summer squash*, which for North Americans is any of the quick maturing, rindless varieties of genus *Cucurbita* that is eaten when immature (the archetype is *zucchini*, or if you prefer, *courgette*, which are discussed below). This fruit is likely to be generically designated as a *marrow* (or fully, *vegetable marrow*) by many other English speakers.

As for *marrow*: its rise to the status of generic term in some English dialects is a little more difficult to discern. The *OED* has a 300-word disquisition on the origins of the word *marrow*, noting at the end of it that 'the development of sense 5 is uncertain.' And what is sense 5 but the 'vegetable marrow.' Its use designating cucurbit fruits did not develop until the early 19th century, but from that point it seems to have spread like wildfire. In British and many other English dialects today, *marrow* is still regarded as the generic term for a group of mainly green-skinned, elongated cucurbits – or more generally, as a synonym for *gourd* when it means 'fruit of a cucurbit.'

As mysterious as the ascent of *vegetable marrow* in British English is its disappearance from American. There can be found a respectable number of 19th century citations of 'vegetable marrow' in American literature, including this one from the December, 1863 issue of *Scientific American*:

> Take the stalks of cabbage, scrape them, leave them in water all night, and the next day cook them like vegetable marrow, and they will be found delicious.

This, and other citations in similes that give *vegetable marrow* as the thing that something else looks like, suggest that most American speakers were familiar with vegetable marrows and regarded the term generically at one time. But it is safe to venture that the majority of Americans today would draw a blank when asked what a vegetable marrow is. *Summer squash* has taken its place. Citations for *summer squash* can be found in American literature starting in 1815 and with increasing frequency throughout the 19th century.

Jobs for *pumpkin*

It is likely that early North American English speakers had some acquaintance with the term *pumpkin*, which came into use in the 17th century: it is from French, the source of a wealth of English food terms. Today *pumpkin* is used in most English dialects to designate hard-rinded, slow-maturing, orange-fleshed varieties of cucurbit – in other words, what North Americans call *winter squash*. North Americans rejected *pumpkin* for generic status in favor of the native American term, but they did not discard the word altogether. They did what speakers often do with jobless words: they gave it something else to do. In modern North American usage, *pumpkin* has the job of designating a particular type of winter squash: one that is roughly spherical (the *sine qua non* of North American pumpkins) and usually orange-rinded (although white and green-skinned pumpkins can be found). In botanical terms, this usually means *Cucurbita pepo*. Other

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cucurbits that are designated as pumpkin without a second thought by many English speakers – such as the many varieties of *C. maxima* and *C. moschata* – are winter squashes for North Americans.

The influence of two American institutions on this process of semantic fixing can't be precisely measured, but they need mentioning because their influence has probably been considerable. One is the tradition of Halloween, in which a pumpkin (not a squash, mind you) is hollowed out and decorated with a face to use as a decorative lantern – a jack-o'-lantern. The other institution is pumpkin pie, which can actually be made with any orange-fleshed winter squash, but in the minds of Americans is made with the same type of pumpkin – sometimes literally the same pumpkin – that is used for jack-o'-lanterns.

Courgette and *zucchini*

A different pattern in dialectal variation pertaining to a different variety of the same species (*Cucurbita pepo*) is illustrated by the terms *courgette* and *zucchini*. The terms designate the same thing: a small, green, elongated vegetable marrow (or summer squash, if you prefer). *Courgette* and *zucchini* share, rather spookily, four other common traits: they're both direct loans from other European languages (*courgette* from French and *zucchini* from Italian), they're both diminutives (of *courge* and *zucca*, respectively), they both entered English only in the 20th century, and their roots (*courge* and *zucca*) designate the same thing in their source languages: namely, and not surprisingly, a gourd. (The jury is not entirely in on this, but it is likely that *courge* and *zucca* have a common etymon in Latin *cucurbita*.) For Britons and most English speakers under the sway of the British dialect, *courgette* is the term for this kitchen and garden staple. Americans, Canadians, and Australians, on the other hand, call it *zucchini*.

As with the case of many food terms, the difference in usage here is probably attributable to the agents of introduction. It is common, if not fashionable, to give new food items their native terms, so as to add a flavor of the exotic to them. Early cites of *zucchini* in American English gloss it as 'Italian squash.' Those for *courgette* in Britain call it a baby marrow. One early citation mentions the possibility of buying them in French markets.

The treatment of cucumbers

A different branch of the Cucurbit family is represented by the genus Cucumis. Nature and language both seemed to have settled on recognizing two main branches of this genus, each with a respective type species: one branch is represented by *Cucumis melo* and includes most things we call *melons* – in particular, all dessert melons except the watermelon. The other main branch is *Cucumis sativus* and includes most of the things we call *cucumbers*. The elongated, green-skinned, white-fleshed cucumber that is indispensable in nearly every world cuisine has been cultivated since ancient times, beginning in its native Asia. Citations in English go back to the 14th century: the Latin form *cucumis* appears in English first as *cucumeris*, and later as *cucumer*, *cowcomber*, and *cowcumber* until the late 17th century when the modern spelling began to prevail.

English dialects around the world today use *cucumber* to designate this fruit. They do not, however, always agree on exactly what the word designates. For Britons, *cucumber* without further qualification brings to mind a quite elongated, usually ridged fruit. This object to North Americans is the *English cucumber*, who use the unqualified noun for a squatter, more tapered, and ridgeless fruit.

A funny thing happens when cucumbers meet food processing: they emerge with different names in different dialects. For North Americans, cucumbers preserved in brine have a generic name: *pickles*. Like *squash*, *pickle* is so deeply imbued with this particular meaning that it has emerged as a hypernym: there are dill pickles, bread and butter pickles, kosher pickles, and sweet and sour pickles, any of which may live in pickle jars or pickle barrels. For North Americans, you don't need to add that it's cucumbers you're talking about when you use the word *pickle*. For them it's mainly a count noun, in which the singular denotes a pickled cucumber, and the plural, multiples of them.

For Britons, however – perhaps because of their attachment to odd substances like Branston pickle – *pickle* is mainly an uncount noun, denoting a chutney-like concoction. The upshot is that North Americans, buying a quick lunch in London, would be as nonplussed at talk about a cheese and pickle sandwich as Britons would be in a North American deli, where people order their sandwiches with

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chips and a pickle. In both dialects, a product has taken over the name of the process that creates it, but the thing most generally designated by *pickle* has turned out to be a different thing in different dialects.

North Americans have no fixed designation for the uncount pickle of British English; that is, the condiment of mixed, pickled items. The main reason for this is probably that North Americans don't eat that much of it. Britons, on the other hand, slip gherkin into the slot occupied by North American pickle. As proof of this, a skyscraper new to the London skyline with a distinctly phallic shape has been dubbed 'the Gherkin.' *Gherkin* has the smaller job in North American dialects of designating small cucumbers, pickled or otherwise.

Momordica

A cousin of the cucumber serves to illustrate some of the confusions that obtain from less settled introductions of cucurbits to English. Perhaps the situation with regard to such indeterminate cucurbits is no different than it once was with the likes of *squash* and *pumpkin*, except that we live in an age where vastly more documentation exists: thus the opportunity arises for information to appear authoritative, when in fact it is not.

Two gourd species familiar to most English speakers were formerly classified under *Momordica* and have since left it, in the way that species tend to do under the critical and fickle eye of scientists. These two species are the *luffa*, now considered an occupant of its own genus (*Luffa aegyptiaca*) and the *squirting cucumber*, now occupying the botanical ontology as *Ecballium elaterium*. The most popular representative today of the genus Momordica is the curious-looking, cucumber-shaped, deeply grooved and warty fruit *Momordica charantia*. The English names assigned to this fruit vary considerably according to your location in space-time: sometimes a distance of only a few miles or a few years makes all the difference!

Momordica charantia seems to have come to the attention of English speakers – most likely North American ones – originally as the *balsam pear*. Under this name it was regarded mainly as an exotic medicinal plant (it is native to Africa), or a cultivated ornamental. *Balsam pear* was probably inspired by *balsam apple*, the English designation for a related species of Momordica. Curiously, however, while *balsam apple* has a long and pedigreed history in English (see the *OED*, *loc. cit.*), most dictionaries do not mention *balsam pear* at all, and those that do don't date it. There is a modicum of evidence to suggest that balsam pear came into usage as a designation for *Momordica charantia* following its introduction by slaves to North America, by using an established pattern of applying a multipurpose modifier *(balsam)* to the name of an existing fruit *(pear)*; but there are not enough dots to connect this speculative etymology as a fact.

More recently, and following a gap of centuries, *Momordica charantia* came to the attention of English speakers in its role in various Asian cuisines. If you're shopping in East London you will most likely find your *Momordica charantia* labeled as *karela*, the Hindi name for it: this is surely recognition of the main ethnic group that shops for it and cooks with it. Move a couple of miles west, however, into Chinatown, and the fruit has changed its name to *bitter melon*, or in some cases, *bitter gourd*: the former term seems favored in Chinese markets, the latter among Southeast Asian shoppers.

We may assume that our ancestors arrived at consensus for many terms without consulting dictionaries, so it is perhaps curious that we have a tendency to hope that our confusions can be resolved in this way. In the case of English cucurbit terms that have not quite settled down yet, a browse through the dictionary may prove to be not very – fruitful.

At *karela*, the *OED* has

> The balsam pear or bitter gourd, *Momordica charantia*, a climbing plant of the family Cucurbitaceæ, native to south-east Asia and tropical Africa, and cultivated in India for its edible, rough-skinned, yellow or white fruit, which is lemon-shaped and may be as much as eight inches long.

This definition begins quite well but then takes the reader on a unexpected diversion: hardly anyone shopping for karela at the market would buy one that was white, yellow, or 'lemon-shaped.' These are all terms that describe the balsam apple, not the balsam pear, and one suspects that the *OED* has confused its Momordica charantia with its *Momordica balsamina*.

This definition at *karela* may send one scurrying to *balsam pear* and *bitter gourd* for clarification or confirmation. It will quickly be found that there is no entry for *balsam pear* in the *OED* – which is a disappointment, for it would

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be helpful to know when and where this term is first attested in English. As for *bitter gourd*: the *OED* has no alphabetic entry, but the compound *bitter gourd* at *gourd* cross-refers the patient reader to the headword *colocynth*, where lies this definition:

> the Bitter-apple *(Citrullus Colocynthis)*, a widely-cultivated plant of the Gourd family, the fruit of which is about the size of an orange, and contains a light spongy and extremely bitter pulp, furnishing the well-known purgative drug.

At this point, one would rightly conclude that the *OED* has gone off the scent, since a completely different fruit, in a different genus, is here described, and not the bitter gourd of *Momordica* at all.

The *Dictionary of American Regional English* (*DARE*) offers slightly more instructive clues. It also has no entry for balsam pear, but at *bitter melon*, the definition says 'the balsam pear (*Momordica charantia*).' *DARE*'s informants for the term were both Hawaiian, suggesting that the designation *bitter melon* – today's most popular, if Google numbers are any indication – entered American English through importation of the fruit and translation of one of its Asian names. There is also evidence to suggest that nineteenth-century Chinese immigration to California may have introduced the translation name *bitter melon* to American English.

The pluralism and multiculturalism that prevail in the Anglosphere today suggest that upstart cucurbits in English probably won't settle down the way that the old ones did. It is likely that, fifty or a hundred years hence, avid supporters of *bitter gourd*, *bitter melon*, and *karela* will coexist within the major English dialects, and English, ever the language of many synonyms, will continue to grow with a lot of built-in redundancy. If any of these Momordica cucurbit term goes by the wayside, it will likely be the earliest and now relatively jobless one whose appearance in English has never been properly accounted for anyway: the *balsam pear*. ■

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