

“ESKIMO” OR “INUIT”?

There are names that cultures give to themselves, and names that are bestowed upon them by others. This is the story of both.

SHE NETS A SNOWSHOE: In the United States, “Eskimo” has long been a catch-all term to describe any Indigenous person from the Arctic Circle. The mere mention of it brings to mind the stereotypical image of a Native person wearing a fur parka, sitting in front of an igloo, eating seal meat. This image was perpetuated by the 1922 silent film *Nanook of the North*, directed by Robert Flaherty, a groundbreaking but wildly inaccurate documentary about an Arctic family, portrayed as much more primitive than they were in real life. The word “Eskimo” was already around, but thanks to the movie, it entered common usage in the 1920s—in particular with the Eskimo Pie and Eskimo kiss. Since then, linguists, etymologists, and anthropologists have put forth several theories as to the word’s origin. Here are the three main ones:

- The word entered English in the late 1500s, from the Danish *Eskimo* or the Middle French *Esquimaux* (plural), both of which probably derive from an Algonquian word meaning “eaters of raw meat.”
- An earlier theory—that doesn’t seem to hold much merit today—is that “Eskimo” isn’t Indigenous at all; it comes from the Latin *excommunicati*. Not being Christian, the Natives were described as the “Excommunicated Ones.”
- In the 1980s, R. H. Ives Goddard III, senior linguist in the Department of Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., presented new findings: The word originated from the Montagnais (Innu) word *ayaškimew*, which means “she who nets a snowshoe.” A far cry from “flesh eating,” lacing snowshoes was and still is a crucial skill and respected art.

Even though the word’s roots come from First Peoples, “Eskimo” is still classified as an *exonym*—a name that was assigned to them by another culture.

INUIT AND INNU: The “Innu” that Goddard referred to is not, as you might think, a shortened form of “Inuit.” They are two distinct groups. The Innu Nation, also called Montagnais, is from a region that comprises parts of Quebec and Labrador in eastern Canada, and there are only about 3,200 members of that group, compared to about 180,000 Inuit. According to the *Canadian Encyclopedia*:

It is possible that the term [ayaškimew] was used generally by the Innu to describe the Mi’kmaq [who inhabited Canada’s Atlantic Provinces including parts of Quebec and Maine] and was later transferred to Inuit upon contact between the two groups. As the word came into use in Ojibwe, its original meaning may have

become blurred, as the *ashk-* prefix can also mean raw or fresh in Ojibwe. French explorers and settlers translated the word to *esquimaux*, the Danish spelling.

Ojibwe is a language spoken by people of that name who live in south-central Canada and the northern parts of the U.S. Midwest.

The word “Inuit” means “people.” The language it’s spoken in is called Inuktitut by culturally similar groups from Canada, Denmark, Russia, and the United States. Both Inuit and Innu are *autonyms*, names a culture gave to themselves...kind of.

NAMING RIGHTS: In the late 1970s, Indigenous leaders from all over the Arctic Circle met in Alaska for the Inuit Circumpolar Council, where they decreed that they were collectively to be referred to as Inuit, and that Inuit means “indigenous members of the Inuit homeland recognized by Inuit as being members of their people and shall include the Inupiat, Yupik (Alaska), Inuit, Inuvialuit (Western Canada), Kalaallit (Greenland), and Yupik (Russia).”

Despite the decree not mentioning “Eskimo”—thereby rejecting it as an acceptable name—the use of that word persists. And the debate continues as to whether “Eskimo” is pejorative. Either way, it does seem to be on the outs: In 2020, the Edmonton Eskimos, a Canadian football team, announced that they would find a new name. Also that year, after nearly a century, Eskimo Pie was changed to Edy’s Pie. As far as proper usage goes, when in doubt, use “Inuit,” not “Eskimo,” but only for the plural. The singular is “Inuk.” According to *National Geographic’s* style guide, “the word *Inuit* means ‘people,’ so avoid using ‘people’ with Inuit.”

LANGUAGE LESSON: On the outs or not, the word “Eskimo” does live on in the linguistics term “Eskimo-Aleut languages” (which comprise the Yupik language group and the Inuit language family). There are some Indigenous peoples—including the Yupik in Alaska and Russia—who are called Inuit even though that name doesn’t appear anywhere in their language (which, in that case, makes it an exonym). Many Yupik still refer to themselves as Eskimo.

Ironically, because it came from the Ojibwe language (before the French corrupted it), “Eskimo” was never a word in any of the Eskimo-Aleut languages; rather, it’s from the Algonquin language family found throughout much of eastern Canada, parts of the midwestern United States, and several northeastern states that border the Atlantic.

All of that may seem confusing, but it’s actually a simplified explanation. Linguistics is very complicated, especially when there are so many groups of people and so many similar names for the same things. We’ve only scratched the surface about Inuit, Eskimo, and Algonquin. There are hundreds more language families and groups around the world, many of them extinct or in danger of going extinct. For more stories of Indigenous words that live on in English, turn to page 330.

otters can smell underwater objects by exhaling bubbles onto the surface of the object, then sniffing them back in again.

INDIGENOUS TO ENGLISH

On page 96, we told you where the names “Eskimo” and “Inuit” came from.

*Now for some more words that were invented long, long ago
by people we know very little about today.*

WORD TO YOUR ANCESTORS

In the 15th century, Europeans sailed the seas in search of trade routes, wares to trade, and new lands to colonize. More often than not, those voyages wreaked havoc on the lives and culture of Indigenous peoples, and for many of them, all that remains are modern versions of a few of their words, including some that might surprise you. For example, you might already know that “teepee,” “kayak,” and “moccasin” come from Indigenous languages, but so do words like “shack,” “bayou,” and both parts of “Coca-Cola” (though from different continents). Because it’s impossible to trace these words all the way back to their first utterances, historical linguists and anthropologists try to pinpoint when and where they entered English, and then do their best to piece the history together. It’s not easy. Here’s some of what they’ve learned so far.

HUSKY

MEANING: Arctic working dogs with thick coats, used for pulling sleds over the tundra

ORIGIN: “Husky,” as it pertains to a gravelly voice or a large person, is not an Indigenous word. That word comes from “dry as a husk” (*husk* is a Germanic word for “little house”). The origin of the name of the husky dog breed is much less cut and dry. It most likely came into English via the French, who shortened it from *Esquimaux*, the same word that likely gave us “Eskimo.” How exactly “husky” came from “Eskimo” isn’t known for sure. One theory: It’s a shortened version of “Eskimo dog,” which is how the breed was often referred to by outsiders in the 19th century. It could have also come from *Ehuskemay*, a word for “Eskimo” recorded in 1743, or a contraction of *Huskimos*, an alternate version of “Eskimo” once used by English sailors. Making it more confusing: For at least a century, the people *and* the dogs were referred to as “husky” (or “hoskey”)—often in unflattering terms, as evidenced by this 1855 account from a British naval officer in Greenland: “The Esquimaux, or ‘Huskies,’ as the Danes customarily term them, come off in sufficient numbers to satisfy you that you are near the haunts of uncivilized men.” It wasn’t until the 20th century that “Eskimo” and “husky” diverged and took on their present forms.



Bigger than you thought? Alaska makes up 17.5 percent of the entire landmass of the United States.

IGLOO

MEANING: Traditionally, a dome-shaped hut made from blocks of compressed snow or ice

ORIGIN: Originally associated with Indigenous people in central and eastern Canada, “igloo” was first recorded by Westerners in 1824. But linguists say that the word itself—or variations of it—goes back 7,000 years or more, to something akin to “uhnloo” that later became “ugloo,” a word found throughout many Arctic cultures. Today, in the Inuit language, the word is spelled “iglu” (its plural is “igluit”), and it can be used to describe any small abode. The actual structure you picture when you think of an igloo is called an *igluwijaq*.

BARBECUE

MEANING: As a verb, the act of grilling food (usually meat) over an open fire outside; as a noun, the social event surrounding it

ORIGIN: Spanish explorers in the West Indies encountered a Caribbean tribe called the Taino, who spoke the now-extinct Arawak language. The Taino were the first people that Christopher Columbus met in the New World. He wrote about them in his journal: “They will give all that they do possess for anything that is given to them, exchanging things even for bits of broken crockery.” One of the things they shared was food grilled on a raised wooden grate over a fire pit. Based on the Taino’s pronunciation, the Spanish called the structure a *barbacoa*. Originally used to describe any small wooden support, over time it became solely associated with grilling and eating meat. In 1755, the word was added to Samuel Johnson’s *The Dictionary of the English Language*. “To ba’rbecue: a term used in the West-Indies for dressing a hog whole; which, being split to the backbone, is laid flat upon a large gridiron, raised about two foot above a charcoal fire, with which it is surrounded.”

Other Taino words: “hammock,” “tobacco,” and “hurricane.”

HURRICANE

MEANING: A large storm with high sustained winds that forms in the North Atlantic Ocean, mainly affecting the Caribbean, Central America, and eastern North America

ORIGIN: *Hunrakan* was what the Maya called their god of the storm. Since 1500 BC, these Mesoamerican Indians lived in what is now southern Mexico, Guatemala, and northern Belize. From there, the word—with varying forms and meanings—spread throughout the Americas and into the Caribbean, where the Taino people used it to describe their god of evil, whose wrath was felt in those intense storms. In the 1550s, Spanish explorers first recorded the word from the Taino, and it entered that language

Number of human deaths attributed to killer whales in the wild: 0. To killer whales in captivity: 4.

as *huracán*. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, over the next few decades, its spelling varied significantly, resulting in at least 39 versions (including *herrycano* and *harrycain*) before it finally landed on “hurricane” in the 1630s.

SKUNK

MEANING: A small mammal that defends itself by spraying a noxious odor

ORIGIN: Europe has no skunks. When settlers first encountered them in New England, the natives, known as the Massachusett people, were calling the animals *segonku*. The word entered English in the 1600s with a simplified pronunciation, spelled something like “squuncke.” Some etymologies say the Indigenous word meant “urine fox,” while others say it’s “he who squirts.” Either one makes scents.

WOODCHUCK

MEANING: A large, burrowing rodent of the marmot genus known today as a groundhog

ORIGIN: “Woodchuck” is a good example of the guesswork that goes into word origins. Depending on the source, it could come from the Narragansett *ockqutchaun*, the Cree *otchek*, the Ojibwe *otchig*, or another Algonquin word, *wejack*. All of these people hail from the northeastern United States and southern Canada, and it wasn’t uncommon for them to have slightly different variations of the same word. Wherever “woodchuck” came from, colonizers gave it a phonetic spelling based on what they heard. When the more descriptive “groundhog” took hold in the mid-19th century (along with the holiday), “woodchuck” was no longer the accepted word for this animal, which has gone by many regional names—including marmot, woodshock, groundpig, whistlepig, whistler, thickwood badger, monax, moonack, weenusk, and red monk. So why is “woodchuck” still around? Blame “The Woodchuck Song” from the early 1900s, which introduced the tongue-twisting conundrum: *How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?*

DID YOU KNOW?

Woodchucks (aka groundhogs) might not be able to chuck wood, but as the largest members of the squirrel family, they can climb trees. Their favorite activity, however, is digging. To excavate a single burrow, a woodchuck will move up to three tons of dirt.

SHACK

MEANING: A small cabin or hut made of wood—usually hastily and sloppily built

ORIGIN: Dictionaries cite two possible origins, the most likely being the Nahuatl word



First car with a touchscreen “Graphic Control Center”: the 1986 Buick Riviera.
The screens were dropped in 1990 after drivers complained they were too distracting.

for “wooden hut,” *xacatl*. Like Algonquin, Nahuatl is a group of languages. It was spoken in central Mexico by about 1.7 million Nahua people, who lived there (and some still do) for 13,000 years. Their best known culture: the Aztec people. “Shack” entered Mexican Spanish as *xacal*, which was pronounced “shackal” and got to the southwestern United States in the 1870s as the shortened “shack.” (A less-cited theory says it’s of European origin, a shortened form of *ramshackle*.)

Other words from Nahuatl languages: “chocolate,” “chili,” “chipotle,” “chia,” “tomato,” and “coyote.”

COYOTE

MEANING: A species of wild dog smaller than a wolf, native to the Americas

ORIGIN: The Nahuatl people called the crafty canine *coyotl*, which meant “trickster.” The Spanish first encountered them in the 1650s, after which they went by “prairie wolf,” “jackal,” and “brush wolf.” But the Indigenous word, first written down in 1651, held on. It reached English 200 years later with various spellings, including *cayjotte* and *cocoyote*. The current version, “coyote,” took hold in the 1880s.

BAYOU

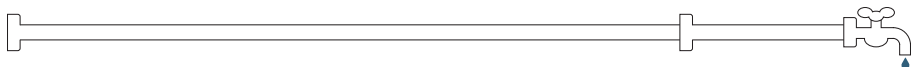
MEANING: A marshy outlet of a lake or river

ORIGIN: When French colonizers of the Gulf Coast region arrived in what is now Louisiana, they already had words for “river” and “stream.” They were less familiar with the slow-moving, swampy waterways that marked the area, so they borrowed the name of a particularly large waterway the Choctaw people were living along called *Bayouk Choupic*. The word entered French as *bayouque*, and then English, first as “buyou,” and then “bayou.” Today, Bayouk Choupic is known as Bayou St. John, and what’s left of it flows through several neighborhoods in New Orleans.

COLA

MEANING: A carbonated beverage traditionally flavored with an extract of kola nuts

ORIGIN: From the 15th to 19th centuries, more than 10 million West African people were kidnapped and taken to the United States via the Atlantic slave trade. When Portuguese slave traders encountered the Temne people of Sierra Leone, the Temne were cultivating rice, cassava, and millet, as well as the nut of an evergreen tree. In the Niger–Congo languages (today, the third-largest language family in the world), it was called *aŋ-kola*, meaning “kola nut.” The Temne chewed on the nuts recreationally, medicinally, and for religious ceremonies. They were even used for currency. By the 1850s, after the active ingredient was found to be caffeine, demand



Before plastics came along, the snow in snow globes was made from animal bone chips.

for the kola nut skyrocketed in the Americas and Europe, where chemists and chefs alike began experimenting with it. How did kola the nut become cola the beverage? See the next entry.

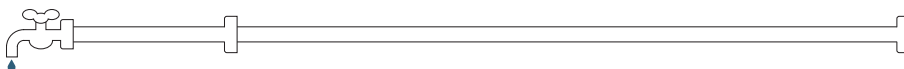
COCAINE, COCA-COLA, AND COKE

MEANINGS: A stimulating narcotic, the trademarked name of the world's most popular carbonated beverage, and a nickname they both share

ORIGIN: Along with kola nuts and other native crops like sugar, tea, chocolate, tobacco, and coffee, coca leaves became popular in the United States in the mid-1800s. The word “coca” comes from the Quechua *cuca*, a large shrub that has been cultivated in the Peruvian Andes for at least 5,000 years. Containing psychoactive alkaloids far more stimulating than caffeine, coca was an integral part of Inca culture when the Spanish conquered South America. (They outlawed the leaves for religious use, but gave them to laborers because it increased production.) As with the kola nut, it took Europeans a long time to catch on to coca's mind-altering effects. In the 1870s, a German graduate student named Albert Niemann developed a method to isolate the active alkaloid from the leaf. In his doctoral thesis, he coined the word “cocaine.”

In the 1880s, Lieutenant Colonel John Stith Pemberton, an Atlanta pharmacist who was addicted to morphine (he'd been wounded in the Civil War), was looking for a safer substitute with similar effects. Pemberton mixed and matched several ingredients until he came up with a sweet, stimulating tonic that contained cocaine from coca leaves, caffeine extracted from kola nuts, sugary syrup, and carbonated water. Pemberton's bookkeeper, Frank M. Robinson, came up with the name. He liked the idea of two big C's on the label, so he replaced the k in “kola nut” and came up with Coca-Cola. Using Spencerian script, a popular typeface of that time, Robinson designed the logo that to this day is among the best-known logos in the world. (Or, as the *New York Times* called it: “Capitalism's flagship.”) Marketed first as a “brain tonic,” Coca-Cola retained trace amounts of cocaine until 1929, and in 2016, the kola nut was replaced with synthetic ingredients.

As for the word “coke,” it was a slang term for cocaine before it became a shortened form of Coca-Cola, which for a time was nicknamed “Dope” (a term later transferred to drugs). In the early 1900s, as people started calling the soft drink Coke, the beverage company tried to quash it with ads that read, “Ask for Coca-Cola by its full name; nicknames encourage substitution.” But consumers insisted on using the nickname, so the beverage company trademarked “Coke” in 1945. Then it introduced Diet Coke in 1982, then Cherry Coke, Vanilla Coke, and many others, keeping alive a little word—*cuca*—that sprouted to life thousands of years ago deep in the Andes mountains...to the best of our knowledge.



Napoleon Bonaparte was allergic to leather.