

Diets and Desire

How language can shape demand for plant-based food

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Key messages

- > Descriptive language offers us a powerful yet currently underutilized tool to shape consumer demand for more environmentally friendly products, including food and drink.
- > This article summarizes evidence on the best descriptive language to encourage consumers to shift their choices towards healthier, more plant-based foods.
- > Key recommendations are to avoid referring to plant-based options as ‘vegan,’ ‘vegetarian’ or ‘meat-free’ and find alternatives for words that imply these are healthy and restrictive choices. Instead, language is better used to emphasize flavor, refer to the provenance of a plant-based dish or enable diners to mentally simulate a rewarding eating experience.

The power of language

The fact that Eskimos are said to have 50 different words for snow, Greeks seven words to describe love and Americans 13 different words for sandwiches¹ is thought to reflect a larger truth common to all these cultures: that the language we use influences how we see the world around us. How we talk about objects, events and people not only reflects our familiarity with them, but also actively influences how we experience them in the first place.

The notion that words have the power to shape how we filter information from our eyes, ears, noses and taste buds is not just an obscure theory from linguistics,^{2,3} but shows itself through many practical examples observable in our everyday lives. Probably the most obvious of these is its application to the field of marketing, where language is used to generate desire for all types of consumer goods, including food and drink.

“Language is used to generate desire”

Language and food marketing

Ask a group of participants in a research study to blind test two anonymous brown soda drinks and you will find that Pepsi often wins out in taste over Coca Cola. Ask, instead, that participants drink either a glass labeled ‘Coke’ or one labeled ‘Pepsi’ and see how exposure to the brand name will tip preferences towards each participant’s prior stated favorite.³ Similarly, other taste tests show that products advertised as containing ‘soy’ are judged less pleasant than when the same product is tasted without this ingredient highlighted on the label.⁴

And the research goes on: consumers prefer the same cheese when described as ‘regular’ rather than ‘light,’⁵ favor identical soups labeled as containing normal levels of salt rather than ‘less sodium’ versions,⁶ are more willing to pay for wine described evocatively than when blind tested,⁷ and even show differences in their hunger hormone response when sampling chocolate milkshakes labeled as ‘620-calorie indulgent’ rather than ‘140-calorie sensible.’⁸

Changing diets

It is no secret that businesses actively capitalize on the fact that language influences expectations and experiences of food in order to boost consumer demand, and work hard to develop the right type of wording to enhance sales of their products.⁹ Recently, however, a new and different audience has begun to consider how to take advantage of the persuasive capabilities of language – interventionists, policymakers and researchers who are looking to find more effective ways to encourage populations around the world to purchase healthier and more environmentally sustainable foods.

“Traditional approaches to encouraging change for social or individual good often fail”

Interest from these groups is rooted in the growing recognition that traditional approaches to encouraging change for social or individual good – that is, population education campaigns or risk communication – often fail.¹⁰ As a result, there is now widespread consensus that better alternatives are needed: interventions that are novel, evidence-based and that will succeed in helping more people to modify their actions for the benefit of their own, others’ and the planet’s long-term best interests.

The language of healthy and sustainable food

In a heavily saturated food market that offers consumers massive choice across a range of evocatively described products, one potentially ‘better’ approach is to deploy more appealing descriptive language to sell healthier and more environmentally friendly foods, rather than just those that make a business more money.

Here, the goal is primarily to boost the purchase and consumption of plant-based whole foods and to reduce intake of red and processed meats.¹¹ This is backed up by accumulating evidence that red meat is associated with a far higher environmental footprint than common plant-based alternative protein sources,¹² while processed meats are increasingly linked to serious health problems such as cancer and cardiovascular diseases.¹³

If we consider how language is currently used to portray plant-based products, we can easily see why these options are

rarely the preferred choice. Plant-based foods are often described in ways that emphasize health and virtuosity (e.g., ‘light,’ ‘nutritious,’ ‘wholesome’)¹⁴ – language that unfortunately cues the consumer to think that they will be unfulfilling and flavorless. Compare this with the descriptions of popular meat-based items on the menus of well-known fast food restaurants (e.g., ‘flame-grilled,’ ‘crispy and tender,’ ‘big tasty,’ ‘legend,’ ‘deluxe,’ ‘mighty,’ ‘supercharger’), and the difference in framing is clear.

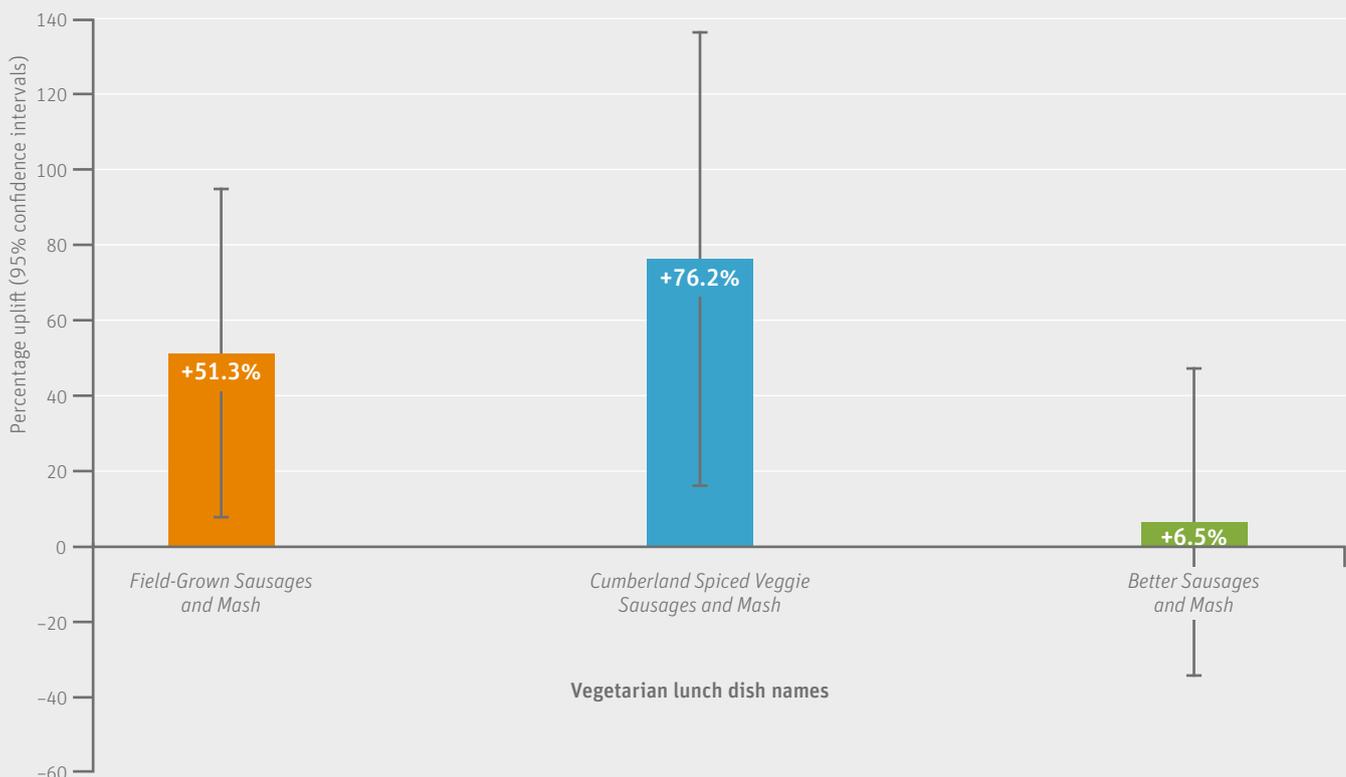
Lessons from our research

If terms that emphasize taste, satisfaction and maximizing value are good for selling more burgers, fillets and nuggets, the question remains as to what is the best language to use if we want to shift more people towards dishes based on pulses, legumes, fruit and vegetables. Here, some indications are beginning to emerge from the literature, including findings from our own research at the Better Buying Lab, a program within the World Resources Institute. These are outlined below as recommendations on how to use language to better promote plant-based foods.

1. Don’t use ‘meat-free’

Labeling plant-based options as ‘meat-free’ is a counterintuitive move if the goal is to encourage diners to shift away from meat

FIGURE 1: Change in the sales of plant-based dishes following the introduction of new language in Sainsbury’s supermarket cafés



suggesting that care needs to be taken in how the benefits of these options are sold to diners. For example, in a 2017 study conducted by Stanford University, researchers discovered that plant-based dishes labeled using ‘healthy restrictive’ language such as ‘reduced-sodium’ or ‘cholesterol-free’ were chosen less often (down by 41 percent) compared with when described using more flavor-focused language such as ‘rich,’ ‘buttery,’ ‘roasted’ or ‘zesty.’²⁵ Based on this work, it seems that one good way to sell more environmentally friendly and healthy plant-based foods is, therefore, to avoid identifying these options as such.

4. Do highlight provenance

If it’s not advisable to highlight the fact that plant-based dishes are healthy or free from meat, then what language does work to boost demand for these options?

Here, research from the Better Buying Lab and the US bakery chain Panera offers us some insight. Across 18 of their sites in the USA, Panera experimented with renaming one of their popular plant-based dishes over the course of a month-long field trial. The chain switched the original label for their ‘Low-Fat Vegan Black Bean Soup’ to a new, more compelling ‘Cuban Black Bean Soup’ – a simple shift that was accompanied by a 13 percent uplift in soup sales compared with a similar period in the year before.²⁶ (Figure 3).

One of the main conclusions drawn from this trial is that words denoting the provenance of plant-based food can boost demand. Hypothesizing why this may be the case, we conclude that provenance words help to link plant-based foods to positive beliefs, memories or traditions associated with a particular region that resonates well with diners (e.g., a childhood home or a holiday destination), or may create a sense of exoticism or mystique that intrigues diners to try out these choices to satisfy a need for novelty.²⁷

FIGURE 3: Panera’s Vegan Black Bean Soup



“Words denoting the provenance of plant-based food can boost demand”

5. Do spotlight the flavor and eating experience

In a 2019 online study conducted by the Better Buying Lab, in collaboration with the UK’s Behavioural Insights Team, a variety of alternative names for plant-based items were tested over eight different example menus taken from a series of real-life restaurants. Of the many different versions that were trialed, the single best-performing name was ‘Mild and Sweet Chickpea and Potato Curry.’ This descriptive label, with a strong emphasis on flavor, led to a 108 percent relative uplift in numbers willing to order this dish compared with when it was described in terms of basic ingredients only (i.e., ‘Chickpea and Potato Curry’) (Figure 4).

The use of language that spotlights flavor or that evokes elements of the eating experience, such as mouthfeel or texture, is thought to help diners to simulate, or vividly imagine, consuming that food, which in turn triggers a desire to seek out that choice.²⁸ For example, in a recent study comparing the type of language people tend to use when describing foods commonly rated as more tempting (e.g., vanilla ice cream, cookies, chips) versus less tempting (e.g., cucumber, apple, banana, rice), far more terms relating to taste, texture and temperature were generated for tempting foods, implying richer mental representations of these compared with less tempting options²⁹ (Figure 5).

“Language offers us a powerful tool to influence choice and is also hugely scalable”

Conclusions

Together, these insights offer some guidance on how language can be used to create more positive expectations and experiences of plant-based foods, enabling us to better sell the benefits of these options. Instead of informing consumers of the health and environmental risks associated with their dietary choices, research conducted by ourselves and others shows that words would be far better used to craft descriptions of the flavor, provenance or eating experience. Language offers us a powerful tool to influence choice by crafting desire, and is not only a relatively cheap intervention to implement, but is also hugely scalable, implying large potential for impact.

An additional and important benefit of this approach is that it makes sense to food businesses. While a range of other be-

FIGURE 4: Difference in the choice of plant-based dishes when described using flavor-emphasizing language versus regular language

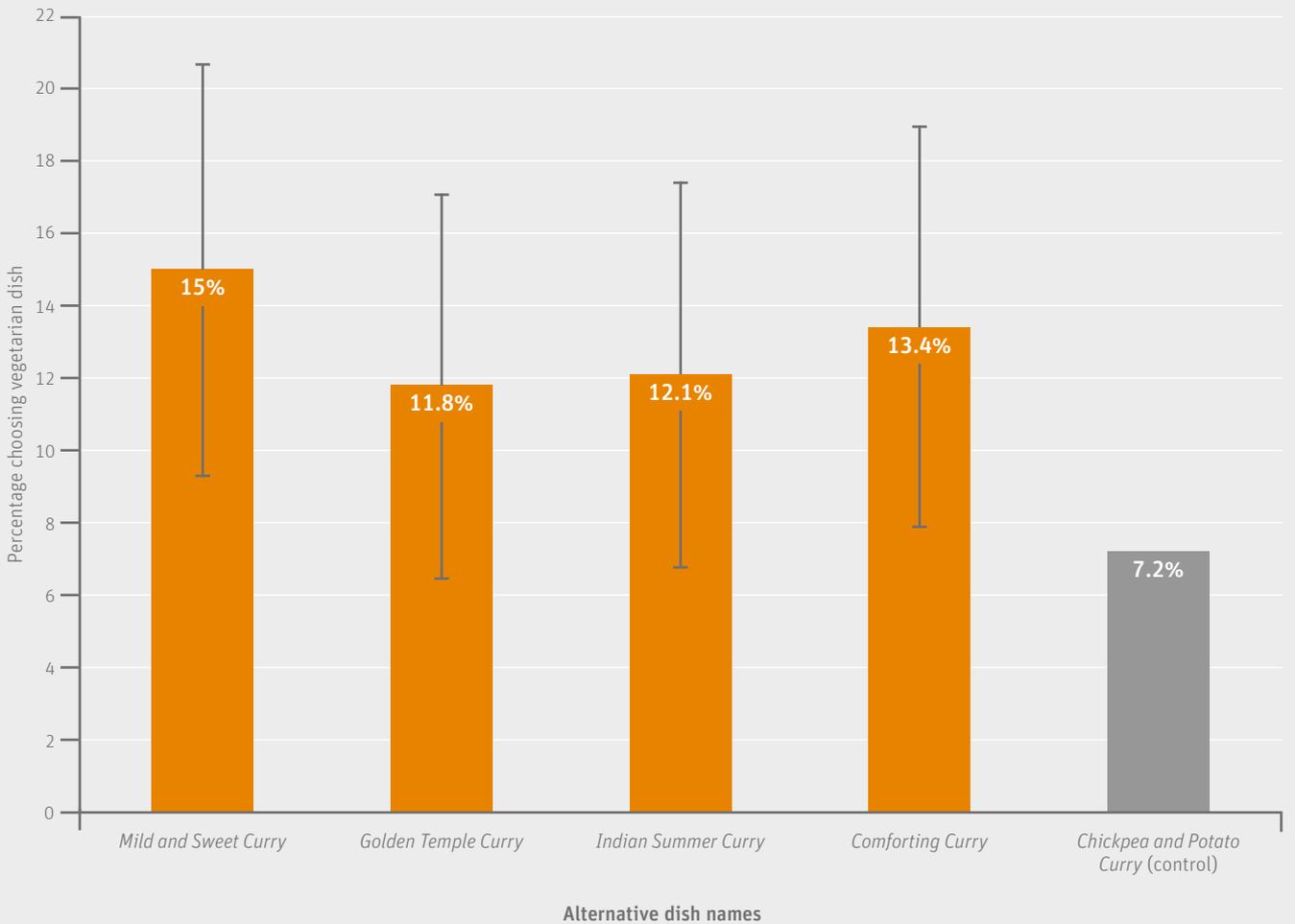
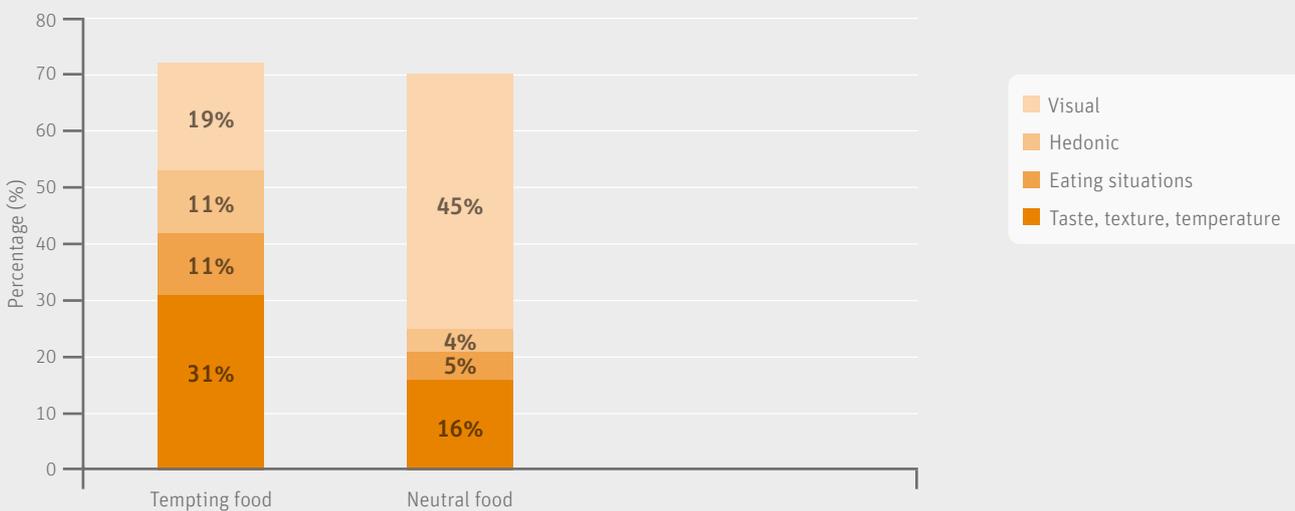


FIGURE 5: Results of a Utrecht University study showing differences in the type of language generated for more tempting versus less tempting foods



behavior change interventions exists, including carbon emission labeling, offering plant-based foods as the default and applying a surcharge to meat dishes, modifying language is an activity that is easily implementable by businesses, aligns with existing marketing activities and is likely to be acceptable to consumers as it does not directly infringe on their choices.

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