

# So, just what does it mean to eat fruit in the afternoon?

Peter  
Trudgill



email: [newsdesk@archant.co.uk](mailto:newsdesk@archant.co.uk)

Words mean what they mean. Not what they used to mean. And not what someone thinks they ought to mean.

When I was about eight years old, in those non-paranoid days when small children were free to walk around on their own, my mother sent me to the grocers on Plumstead Road in Thorpe to do some shopping for her.

The grocer, Mr Goldsmith, was a very nice man, and I liked him. "Good morning, Peter," he said as I walked in. "It's not morning, Mr Goldsmith", I replied cockily, "it's after 12 o'clock ". We had just been taught at school what the word 'noon' meant. The word is common enough in North America, but it's not one that English people use much, and we hadn't known.

The teacher told us that it meant the same as 'midday', and that it was the origin of the word 'afternoon'.

Mr Goldsmith smiled at me and answered, with great authority: "That's not afternoon until you've had your dinner".

I was rather embarrassed, because I knew he was right. Dinner was the meal you had in the middle of the day – one o'clock in our house – and afternoon began once it was over:

English-speakers know what afternoon



■ Dinner ladies serving lunch to children at Chapel Break Middle School in Norwich in 1988. According to Peter Trudgill, the afternoon starts once you have had this meal.

means. It does not mean "after noon". If someone tells you they'll visit you tomorrow afternoon, you'd be most surprised if they turned up the next day at 12.15.

English speakers also know what the word "fruit" means. If you say to your hostess that, yes please, you would like some fruit for dessert, you'd be most surprised to be served tomatoes rather than peaches or pears.

Everyone knows that tomatoes aren't fruit – except, of course, for botanists, who tell us that, technically, they are. But that doesn't make any difference to what the

word means in normal usage. In my line of business, there are academics who tell their colleagues that they're wrong if they refer to their female students as "girls".

The students are adult human beings, they say, and should be accorded the respect of being called "women".

I see what they mean. But if you and I were together in my office and I told you that a woman was about to come and see me, you would, I think, be just a little taken aback if the person who walked in turned out to be 18 years old.

Words mean what they mean.