

# 4 Decades of Fries: The Survey of Canadian English

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## Introduction

In 1972, "The Survey of Canadian English" was conducted, involving over 14,000 school children and their parents in every province of Canada (Scargill et al., 1972). Question 71 examined vocabulary preference for the word meaning the "deep-fried oblong pieces of potato", where respondents were presented with three options: a)chips, b)french fries or c)fries (Scargill et al., 1972). Four decades later, the question was restudied focusing on the province of Ontario. The question at hand demonstrates how languages change over time, particularly from one generation to the next, and how social differentiation sets in between children and parents. The hypothesis is that in 2016, for students and parents alike, *fries* is expected to be the most selected term, *french fries* is expected to maintain its use over *chips*, and *chips* is expected to have a great decline. These results were predicted based on years of prior contact with individuals from Ontario.

## Method

The respondents chosen were 26 English-speaking Canadians who spent majority of their lives in Ontario, and who still live there today. 13 of the respondents were students between the ages 18-24, and the other 13 respondents were parents between the ages 45-60. The 13 students chosen by the researcher were known to have at least one parent who was also from Ontario, based on prior knowledge. Using SurveyMonkey, a two question online survey was created, comprised of Question 71 from the 1972 Survey, along with a question examining the age range of participants, which included the options of age groups a)18-24, b)25-39, and c)40-65. Data was gathered from respondents by having the link of the online survey sent to the 13 students via email, text message, or online messenger, and was then asked to be forwarded to only one of their parents who were also from Ontario. While, the same wording of question 71 from the 1972 Survey was used in the 2016 Survey, a photograph of the object was also included, in order to clarify what object was being asked about (Appendix 1). The description, "deep-fried oblong pieces of potato" may have proved confusing to those in the 2016 Survey without a visual representation, as there are various other forms of potatoes that can be described this way. The results were communicated in an online format provided by SurveyMonkey (Appendix 2).

## Results

Table 1 – The Response of Parents and Students in 1972 to the question: Deep-fried oblong pieces of potato are called: (a) chips; (b) french fries; (c) fries.

Data reported is the average of the percentages for male and female respondents.

Parents			Students		
A	B	C	A	B	C
27.5	70.5	1	14.5	80	4

Table 2 – The Response of Parents and Students in 2016 to the question: Deep-fried oblong pieces of potato are called: (a) chips; (b) french fries; (c) fries.

Parents (13 respondents)			Students (13 respondents)		
A	B	C	A	B	C
0	61	39	0	31	69

## Discussion

### Limitations

In the 2016 study, limitations on the sample were taken into account. While there was almost equal male and female representation among students, there was no way to obtain an equal representation of gender among parents, as it was instructed that the students give only one parent the survey, as long as they were from Ontario, regardless of gender. Furthermore, due to the small number of respondents in the sample, the likelihood of finding any significant difference within the data based on gender was very small. As a result, the percentages of the two genders in the 1972 Survey were averaged, and have been treated as one representation, in order to be comparable with 2016 data.

### Identification of results

In 1972, *french fries* was most popular, with 70.5% of parents, and 80% of students selecting the term. While only 14.5% of students had selected *chips* in 1972, there was still a

considerable amount of usage among parents at 27.5%. On the other hand, the use of the term *fries* was miniscule, being selected by only 1% of parents, and 4% of students. Today, *french fries* continues to be prevalent, especially with 61% of parent participants selecting the term. While 31% of students selected *french fries*, the term *fries* has gained considerable popularity, especially among students, being the majority's (69% of students) choice. Likewise, *fries* has gained some solid presence among parents with 39% of parents selecting the term. In total, *fries* is the most popular choice, where 53.9% of respondents chose the term (Appendix 2). On the other hand, *chips* seems to be obsolete among both parents and students, where no participants selected this option.

## Analysis of Results

In 2016, one term, *chips*, could be considered obsolete among both students and parents in Ontario, while another term, *fries*, has gained more popularity than the use of *french fries*, which was the most popular term in 1972 (Appendix 2). In 2016, *french fries* was the most popular term chosen among parents, while *fries* was the most popular term chosen among students. One may have assumed that *chips* had just died out with the older generation of parents in 1972. However, this would mean that no students at that time were using the term. In actuality, 14.5% of the student participants in 1972 were also using *chips*, and those participants today would belong to the same age group as the parents who answered the 2016 survey. Thus, there seems to have been no preservation of *chips* among this age group over the past 4 or so decades. Instead, the age group consisting of parents in 2016 has retained the use of *french fries*, and has also added another word to their vocabulary, *fries*. The fact that parent's use of the term *fries* in 2016 has surpassed the use of *chips* in 1972, shows a shift in which word is deemed acceptable among parents in describing the object.

For students, the use of *french fries* has decreased drastically, from 80% in 1972 to 31% in 2016. Instead, *fries*, was chosen by 69% of students in 2016. No students chose *chips*, and the fact that no parents selected the term, suggests that they did not pass it down to their children. Furthermore, one could suggest that *french fries* is declining from generation to generation, and that *fries* is emerging in newer contexts, being picked up increasingly among young people and even by the older generation.

## Explanation

Today, in Canada, it can be noted that most menus will refer to the "deep-fried oblong pieces of potato" as *fries* or *french fries*, unless when serving the dish, "fish and chips." Other than this instance, when Canadians use the word *chips*, they are most likely referring to what is called *crisps* in British English. The 1972 Survey identified *chips* as being associated with British English, while associating *french fries* and *fries* with North American English, deeming *fries* as colloquial (Scargill et al., 1972). Thus, the drastic decrease in the use of *chips* and drastic increase of *fries* in 2016, could possibly be explained by British English's weakening influence on Canadian culture, and America's dominance in becoming a more accepted standard of English in Canada. American media dominates Canadian popular culture. Popular film produced almost exclusively in Hollywood, and Canadians' access to all major American television networks, provide the means for American vocabulary and slang terms to spread without difficulty (Boberg, 2010:31). Furthermore, the close proximity of Canada to the US, is vital to the amount of contact Canadians have with American English. The US is the most popular destination for Canadians, and Americans are Canada's most frequent visitors (Boberg, 2010: 32). Moreover, many Canadian industries have significant levels of American ownership, and many Canadian companies prosper by extending their operations to the US (Boberg, 2010: 33). Thus, these industries/companies, owned by or located in the US would most likely be using American terms over British ones, especially restaurants or fast-food chains.

Furthermore, the results in the 2016 Survey may also be explained by the changing attitudes of Canadians towards American English/culture over time. If Canadians hold a critical, hostile or resentful attitude towards American English/culture, then they are presumably less likely to want to use American terms, and may instead choose to hold onto British English (Boberg, 2010: 30). Thus, the fact that *chips* has "disappeared", may mean that less Canadians are holding onto British English terms, and are instead being more accepting of American culture. This acceptance is reiterated by the increasing use of the word *fries*. What was once perceived as a colloquial term has become more accepted in daily speech, even among older age-groups.

## Evaluation of Hypothesis

The hypothesis did not predict *french fries* to be used among the majority of parent respondents, but instead expected *fries* to be the most frequent term selected regardless of age group. The hypothesis predicted that *chips* would decrease, but did not predict it to be obsolete for both students and parents. The hypothesis was correct in that *fries* exceeded all other terms, even though only by a small margin (Appendix 2).

## References

Charles Boberg, *The English Language in Canada: Status, History and Comparative Analysis* (Cambridge U. P., 2010)


Scargill, Matthew Henry and Henry J. Warkentyne. 1972. The Survey of Canadian English: A report. *English Quarterly* 5,3: 47-104.

## Appendix

Appendix 1. – The 2016 Survey created by SurveyMonkey on surveymonkey.com that was sent out to the 13 student respondents and then forwarded to at least one of their Ontarian parents.

Survey of Canadian English

1. Deep-fried oblong pieces of potato are called:




chips  
 french fries  
 fries

2. Age group:

18 - 24  
 25 - 39  
 40 - 65

Done!

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See how easy it is to [create a survey](#).

Appendix 2. – The online format provided by surveymonkey.com communicating the collection of results, where the use of *fries* exceeds *french fries*.

