mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “Why do we call them doughnuts?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Hi, it's Doug! Are you a fan of doughnuts? Well, I'm standing outside a doughnut shop near my house. Look at the size of this. Isn't it huge?

We got a question about doughnuts this week from someone named Connell. So let's give him a call now.

[Video Call]
- Hi, Doug!
- Hi, Connell!
- I have a question for you. How did doughnuts get their name?
- That's a great question.

Why do we call doughnuts, doughnuts? To be honest, we could have called them anything. We could have called them schmoop la doops, or we could have called them sassenfringles. But no, we call them doughnuts—why? Why doughnut?

What's so interesting about questions like this is how do you figure out how anything came to be called what it's called? To solve this kind of mystery, there's a secret tool. This thing, it's awesome—it's a special kind of book. It’s a kind of dictionary.

Now, you might know that a dictionary is a book that has every word in our language. And you can look up any word, and it tells you how to spell it and what that word means. This thing, it's a special kind of dictionary. It's called an etymology dictionary.

Now, let me tell you what that means. I wish it had a better name. Etymology means the story of a word. So this doesn't tell you what a word means, instead if you look up a word in this book, it tells you the story of the word. It tells you why we chose to call the word *that* word. So what I can do is, I can look up doughnut in the etymology dictionary. And here we get our first clue.

Now, you might have seen doughnut spelled like this: D-O-N-U-T, right? That's how a lot of people spell it today. But doughnut is sometimes spelled like this and this is how it used to be spelled. Does that give you any clues?

Just by looking at the word, can you tell where at least part of the word doughnut comes from?

Now would be a good time to pause the video if you want to take a guess.

Okay. You ready?

Look at the first part of that word—the “dough” part of the word, doughnut. You might have heard of dough before. Doughnuts are made of dough. It's the same stuff we use to make bread. So, that's the dough part.

But now, what about the second part of that word, “nut”? A doughnut doesn't look like a nut. What's it got to do with a nut? It seems like nothing. But if you look in the etymology dictionary, it tells us.

Doughnuts weren't always a thing. They were introduced from the Dutch, a people who live in Europe who called them olykoeks. Now, that's Dutch for oil cake. It's dough that you fry in oil, which makes it become cake. So, you've got an oil cake. Now, that name didn't catch on for them. So why would we start calling them doughnuts?

Well, notice what those original Dutch doughnuts look like. Do you notice how they don't have a hole in them do they? There's no hole. We think of doughnuts as round with a hole in it. I mean, if it doesn't have that, it's not a doughnut, right? But it turns out the hole came later.

You see, instead, doughnuts used to look like this—like round globs of dough. A lot of people thought that the shape of this looked like a nut, almost like an almond. So the name became doughnut because it's a fried ball of dough that seemed to be in the shape of a nut.

There you have it! All of this thanks to the special tool—the etymology dictionary—a book that tells you the story of a word. What other words do you think would be interesting to look up in an etymology dictionary?

Well, if you want to look up any word, here's an etymology dictionary online that you can go to: etymonline.com.

That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Connell, for asking it!