

Now, the VOA Special English program, Words and Their Stories.

Baloney is a kind of sausage that many Americans eat often. The word also has another meaning in English. It is used to describe something – usually something someone says – that is false or wrong or foolish.

Baloney sausage comes from the name of the Italian city, Bologna. The city is famous for its sausage, a mixture of smoked, spiced meat from cows and pigs. But baloney sausage does not taste the same as beef or pork alone.

Some language experts think this different taste is responsible for the birth of the expression “baloney.” Baloney is an idea or statement that is nothing like the truth...in the same way that baloney sausage tastes nothing like the meat that is used to make it.

Baloney is a word often used by politicians to describe the ideas of their opponents.

The expression has been used for years. A former governor of New York state, Alfred Smith, criticized some claims by President Franklin Roosevelt about the successes of the Roosevelt administration. Smith said, “No matter how thin you slice it, it is still baloney.”

A similar word has almost the same meaning as baloney. It even sounds almost the same. The word is "blarney." It began in Ireland about 1600.

The lord of Blarney Castle, near Cork, agreed to surrender the castle to British troops. But he kept making excuses for postponing the surrender. And he made them sound like very good excuses. "This is just more of the same blarney."

The Irish castle now is famous for its Blarney stone. Kissing the stone is thought to give a person special powers of speech. One who has kissed the Blarney stone, so the story goes, can speak words of praise so smoothly and sweetly that you believe them, even when you know they are false.

A former Roman Catholic bishop of New York City, Fulton Sheen, once explained, "Baloney is praise so thick it cannot be true. And blarney is praise so thin we like it."

Another expression is "pulling the wool over someone's eyes." It means to make someone believe something that is not true. The expression goes back to the days when men wore false hair, or wigs, similar to those worn by judges in British courts.

The word "wool" was a popular joking word for hair. If you pulled a man's wig over his eyes, he could not see what was happening. Today, when you "pull the wool over someone's eyes," he cannot see the truth.



This VOA Special English program WORDS AND THEIR STORIES was written by Marilyn Christiano. I'm Warren Scheer.