FROM CUSTOMARY TO METRIC: ON LATE MODERN ENGLISH MEASUREMENTS*

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Abstract

The paper aims to analyse Late Modern English instructional texts with respect to the use of measure terminology. It will focus on the changes in the use of measurement terms in light of the amendment of the Weights and Measures Act, which took place at the beginning of the 19th century. Two major categories of measure terms will be discussed: (i) specific terms, such as *pound* and *ounce*; and (ii) non-specific ones, which contain imprecise terminology, such as *a bit*, *a good deal of*, as well as container-related terms, such as *pot*, *kettle*, *cupful* and *glassful*. The research will answer whether the unification of the metric system affected the degree of precision among cookbook writers. The study is based on two parts of the *Corpus of Women's Instructional Texts in English* covering the 18th and 19th centuries, respectively.

Keywords: Late Modern English, CoWITE, Measurements, Dry Weight System.

DE LO CONSENTUDINARIO AL MÉTRICO: SOBRE LAS MEDIDAS EN EL INGLÉS MODERNO TARDÍO

Resumen

El artículo tiene como objetivo analizar textos instructivos del inglés moderno tardío en relación con el uso de la terminología de medidas. Se centra en los cambios en el uso de los términos de medición a la luz de la modificación de la Ley de Pesos y Medidas (*Weights and Measures Act*), que tuvo lugar a comienzos del siglo XIX. Se discuten dos categorías principales de términos de medida: (i) términos específicos, como *pound* y *ounce*; y (ii) términos no específicos, que contienen terminología imprecisa, como *a bit, a good deal of*, así como términos relacionados con recipientes, como *pot, kettle, cupful* y *glassful*. La investigación responde a la pregunta de si la unificación del sistema métrico afectó al grado de precisión entre los autores de libros de cocina. El estudio se basa en dos partes del *Corpus of Women's Instructional Texts in English* que cubren los siglos XVIII y XIX, respectivamente.

Palabras clave: inglés moderno tardío, CoWITE, medidas, sistema de peso en seco.

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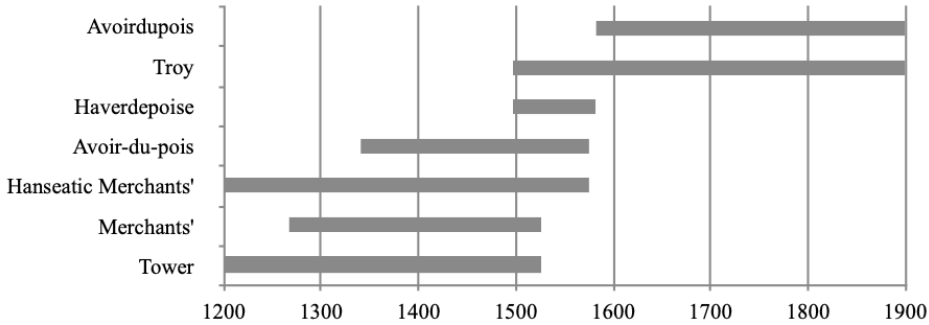

Figure 1. The major English dry weight systems and the period of their usage (based on Ross 1983, 18)

1. INTRODUCTION

The British metric system was, for a long time, chaotic and imprecise. In fact, there were several systems "based upon national systems enacted in law by the Crown"; however, there were also local (city and county) systems, which were often inaccurate and approximate, which caused a lot of regional variation (Ross 1983, 16). Within the dry weight measuring, for instance, 29 different systems were identified in England, seven of which may be regarded as primary ones at certain periods in the history (see Figure 1 above). The multiplicity of systems, diversity of terminology and differences in the values caused general confusion. As Thomas (1987, 117-118) writes, "The size of the perch and the acre varied in different parts of the country, while that of the bushel varied both regionally and when applied to different commodities. (...) In the remoter shires a bushel contained two or three times as much as in the counties near London, and a perch was a good deal longer. There were twelve ounces in the pound troy (used by goldsmiths), sixteen in the pound avoirdupois and eighteen in a Cornish pound of wool or mutton. The stone varied from eight pounds in weight to twenty-four pounds according to the commodity concerned."

The same confusion existed in the metric terminology used with reference to various food products, which contributed to the fact that, until the Early Modern English period, physicians and cooks used intuitive (and often imprecise) units of measure (Thomas 1987). A study on medieval measurements in instructional texts shows that in cooking recipes the non-specific measure terms, such as *enough, (a) little, some*, prevailed. In contrast, specific terminology (i.e. based on one of

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the metric systems, e.g. *ounce, pound, pennyweight*), as well as container-related terms (e.g. *cupful, dishful, potful, spoonful*) were in minority (Bator & Sylwanowicz 2017). Similar conclusions were drawn from medical instructions; however, here the authors noticed an increase in the use of specific terms towards the end of the Middle English period. Such a shift was also observed in culinary jargon, but only in the 17th century. A shift from non-specific to more precise measure terminology, on the one hand, has been attributed to the importation of Arabic mathematical texts (Spiller 2008); on the other hand, it has been explained by a shift in the target audience of cookbooks (Diemer 2013).

In any case, it should not be a surprise that the need for a unified system of measurements arose, prompting several attempts to redefine the existing units. Some of these were the introduction of the Winchester Units by King Henry VII in 1495, or the establishment of the Exchequer Standards by Queen Elizabeth I in 1588. However, even though some metric units became unified (Fox 2024), a significant amount of regional variation persisted. In the eighteenth century, among others due to "the efficiency of taxation" (Dijkman 2011, 205), a sturdy campaign aimed at standardisation of the system of weights and measures began. It ended with the passing of the Weights and Measures Act in 1824, which implemented one unified system across the British Empire. The Act defined all the standard metric units, "from which all other Weights shall be derived, computed, and ascertained" (Weights and Measures Act, §IV).

However, standardisation is a gradual process. Despite the introduction of the Weights and Measures Act, a significant number of recipe books remained imprecise and intuitive in terms of measurements, and where precise weight units were used, they might have represented different metric systems. This paper aims to examine a corpus of instructional texts from before and after the amendment of the Act in order to scrutinise whether any differences in terms of the use of metric units can be noticed. Has the unification of measurement terms contributed to an increased precision among cookbook writers? Or were they persistently using terminology based on the volume of kitchen tools and body parts, such as *cupful* and *handful*, or their own intuition, such as *enough* or *not too much*?

2. CORPUS AND METHODOLOGY

The study is based on instructional texts written in English and published in the 18th and 19th centuries. The database consists of two parts of the *Corpus of Women's Instructional Texts in English* (= CoWITE), which represent the two centuries, respectively. The 18th-century subcorpus consists of 22 text samples, the 19th-century subcorpus of 33 text samples, each of which exceeds the length of half a million words, coming to a total of 1,044,674 tokens in length. Table 1 illustrates the exact dates and size of particular collections.

The texts were searched using the Sketch Engine tool, each of the two subcorpora independently. This was achieved by selecting the advanced concordance search for all lemmas representing particular weight and measure terminology from

TABLE 1. DATES AND SIZE OF THE COLLECTIONS INCLUDED IN THE TWO CORPORA (ALONSO-ALMEIDA et al. 2025)

CoWITE18			CoWITE19		
Year	Author	No. of tokens	Year	Author	No. of tokens
1703	Fitzgerald	38,454	1806	Rundell Maria	20,614
1709	Hickes	17,152	1814	Haslehurst Priscilla	31,325
1712	Fuller	13,329	1818	A lady	19,803
1714	Kettilby	21,056	1824	Randolph Mary	25,288
1715	Owen	8,013	1825	Bird Mary	3,299
1720	Haddock	17,363	1825	Copley Esther	4,691
1728	Smith	24,259	1825	Copley Esther	2,107
1730	Wake	392	1825	Holland Mary	16,021
1733	Harrison	27,494	1830	A lady of distinction	2,071
1740	Johnston	22,015	1831	Smith Prudence	27,487
1747	Glasse	26,062	1835	Corbet Anne	18,063
1750	Bradley	27,109	1841	Mrs Child	26,892
1752	Moxon	27,809	1849	Mrs Putnam	24,596
1755	Cleland	27,913	1850	Mrs Bliss of Boston	22,812
1767	Shackleford	25,140	1853	Cust Mary Anne Boode, Lady	6,423
1769	Raffald	26,321	1854	Leslie Eliza	25,859
1774	Maciver	25,282	1863	Hill Georgiana	25,399
1777	Mason	28,219	1864	Wittenmyer Annie	5,720
1785	Fisher	25,114	1864	Wittenmyer Annie	6,001
1789	Cole	28,696	1866	Mrs Toogood	17,962
1791	Frazer	57,286	1875	Beeton Mary	15,152
1795	Taylor	27,495	1880	Mrs Eliza a Pitkin	6,176
			1880	Pye Julie	10,019
			1883	Hooper Mary	10,453
			1885	Clarke Edith	10,090
			1885	Edden Helen	10,142
			1886	Clarke Edith	14,776
			1886	Final Lees-Dods Matilda	8,281
			1890	Everard Mary	30,875
			1893	Campbell Helen	10,141
			1896	Clarke Edith	10,221
			1897	Earle Maude	26,129
			1899	Mary A Boland	7,813
	TOTAL:	541,973		TOTAL:	502,701

the 18th and 19th centuries, including various spelling variants. The list of lemmas was compiled with the help of *A Dictionary of Weights and Measures for the British Isles: The Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* (Zupko 1985), which provides information about the timeline of their use, as well as Ross's *Archaeological Metrology* (1983), where all the values for the weight units representing various metric systems can be found. As the material under analysis covers recipes, the list was restricted to dry weight measurements. The non-specific terms were listed based on the available publications dealing with recipe collections from different periods (Norrick 1983; Chiaro 2013; Diemer 2013; Bator & Sylwanowicz 2017).

3. RESULTS

In the following analytical part, the measure terms will be discussed according to two major categories: (a) specific terms, which are based on any of the weight and measure systems, e.g. *dram, ounce, pound*, etc.; and (b) non-specific terms, which do not give the precise measurements, e.g. *a blade, a glass, a handful, a little, a (good/great) quantity, some,* etc.

3.1. Specific measure terms

The specific measure terms refer to those terms which belong to any of the weight and measure systems used in the 18th and 19th centuries (see Table 2 for a list of terms found in the analysed material). The two major systems used throughout the two centuries were the Troy and the Avoirdupois Weight Systems (see Figure 1 above). The former was adopted by Henry VII in 1497, originally for measuring

TABLE 2. THE NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES (TOKENS) OF THE SPECIFIC DRY WEIGHT MEASURE TERMS FOUND IN THE ANALYSED CORPUS.

specific measure term	18th century	19th century
dragm	113	39
gram	1	—
ounce	1,744	1,357
pound	2,925	1,362
scruple	28	6
stone	2	2
mutchkin	322	—
peck	78	16
TOTAL:	5,213	2,782

precious metals; and later, it was extended to corn and grain products. The major weight units used in the Troy system were: *grain, pennyweight, ounce, pound, pottle, bushel, hundredweight, quarter* and *ton*. The system continues to this day, in a slightly modified form, as some of the units were abolished in the 19th century (Ross 1983). With time, it was also restricted to its original purpose, i.e., measuring precious metals and stones (OED: s.v. *troy*, n2). The Avoirdupois Weight System was introduced by Elizabeth I in 1582 to replace some of the previously existing systems. It makes use of such units as: *scruple, grain, dra(ch)m, ounce, pound, stone, quarter, hundredweight* and *ton*. The two systems differ in the values of particular weight measures. For instance, a Troy pound equals 373.248 grams, whereas an Avoirdupois pound equals 453.6 grams. A Troy ounce weighs 31.104 grams, while an Avoirdupois ounce is 28.35 grams (Ross 1983). However, the latter is used "for all goods except the precious metals, precious stones, and medicines" (OED: s.v. *avoirdupois*), which, to a high extent, is what the Troy system covers.

Even though both subcorpora contain the specific measure terminology, all the measure units predominate in the earlier material, not only in terms of their frequencies (number of tokens) but also in the number of distinctive terms (types) mentioned in the recipes. The most popular weight units found in both subcorpora are *pound* and *ounce*, both of which are applied to a variety of products, such as herbs and spices, vegetables, butter, or meats. The 18th-century material not only outnumbers the later one in terms of the use of *pound* and *ounce*, but also both of these measurements are used in the abbreviated form, see example (1). In the later century, only eight tokens of *oz* were found (see example (2)), which might serve as evidence that these measurement units were better assimilated and more widely known (especially to non-professional audience) in the 18th century.

(1) Eggs, keep out 6 Whites for glazing, take 3 *lib* . of fine Sugar, beat your Sugar an Eggs, till they be thick and white, take 2 *lib*. and a half of sweet Butter, ... (CoWITE18; 1740)
2 *oun* of granies; 2 *oun* of Caraway seeds, 2 *oun* of Aniseeds; 2 *oun* of Fenell seeds 2 *oun* of Lickerice 2 *oun* of Galling all; 2 *oun* of Camomill ... (CoWITE18; 1703)

(2) 1 *oz*. butter, 1 *oz* , Flour, 1 gill of Oyster Liquor, 1 gill of Milk, 1⁄2 gill of Cream, Lemon Juice, Cayenne and Salt. (CoWITE19; 1885)

It is worth noting that three weight units found in the 18th-century subcorpus do not represent the Avoirdupois system, i.e. *gram*, *mutchkin* and *peck*. The first one originates from the French metric system. Zupko's *A Dictionary of Weights and Measures for the British Isles: The Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* does not include this unit at all. In the analysed material, it was used only once, in a medical recipe rather than a culinary one, see (3). *Mutchkin* goes back to the Scottish measure system, which was also used regionally in Northern England. It was used "for liquids and for dry substances of a powdery or granular nature" (OED: s.v. *mutchkin*). It was relatively popular in the 18th-century corpus, found in a variety of collections (see (4)). The last of the measure units which stands out of the Avoirdupois system,

peck, has been used in Britain since 1405 and is applied to "dry goods equal to a quarter of a bushel, now equivalent (in Britain) to two imperial gallons (approx. 9.09 litres)" (OED: s.v. *peck* n[1], 2a). Ross (1983, 35) enumerates it within the William III Winchester Corn Weight System, used from the beginning of the 18th century until 1826, which correlates with the diminishing number of occurrences of this particular measure unit in the 19th-century subcorpus. Its last record was found in 1854.

(3) Take four ounces of sweet oil one ounce of spermaceti, and 25 *grams* of camphire, ... (CoWITE18; 1785)
(4) TAKE a *Mutchkin* of fine Oat-meal, put to it two Chopins of Water, let it stand twelve Hours; ...(CoWITE18; 1775)

The specific measure terms were found in both subcorpora; however, they undoubtedly dominate in the earlier material. Not only do they abound in terms of the number of tokens, but a wider variety of types were selected from the 18th-century texts, which proves that at that time, measure terminology was not limited to units representing the Avoirdupois weight system.

3.2. Non-specific measure terms

This category contains terminology referring to weight and measure units which have not been specified. They have been called 'non-technical' by Carroll (1999) or 'vague' by Diemer (2013), as

(i) they rely on the cook's knowledge or intuition, e.g. *sufficiency, a piece, enough* (see examples under (5));
(ii) they might be based on parts or forms of the product referred to, e.g. *a blade, a clove, a stick* (see examples (6)); or
(iii) they might depend on the size of the container used for adding them, e.g. *a glass, a cupful, a pan, a spoonful*, etc. (see examples (7) and (8)). This group also contains what Spiller calls "measurements derived from the body" (2008, ix), as terms such as *handful* are included here as well. In what follows, this subcategory will be referred to, after Bator and Sylwanowicz (2017), as 'container-related terms'.

Tables 3 and 4 illustrate the measure units representing the (general) non-specific and the container-related terminology, respectively, together with the number of tokens found in the analysed corpus.

(5) Take half a pint of sorrel-juice, half a pint of white wine, and some scalded gooseberries, to which add a *sufficiency* of sugar and butter. ... (CoWITE19; 1831)
... to every two lbs. of potatoes add one spoonful of sweet butter or lard, a little salt and *enough* flour to make a dough, ... (CoWITE19; 1864)

TABLE 3. THE NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES (TOKENS) OF THE NON-SPECIFIC MEASURE TERMS FOUND IN THE ANALYSED TEXTS.

NON-SPECIFIC MEASURE TERM	18th CENTURY	19th CENTURY	NON-SPECIFIC MEASURE TERM	18th CENTURY	19th CENTURY
bit	181	254	much	723	126
blade	132	172	part	56	20
bunch	91	98	piece	526	626
bundle	104	70	pinch	2	111
clove	32	20	plenty	37	—
deal	76	48	quantity	305	280
drop	93	61	slice	268	326
enough	9	73	scrape	40	4
faggot	68	3	some	1,524	738
(a) few	373	501	sprig	59	74
grain	34	21	squeeze	50	4
(a) little	2,625	1,792	stick	49	32
lump	60	79	sufficiency	5	16
many	129	80	-worth	13	22
			TOTAL:	7,664	5,651

TABLE 4. THE NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES (TOKENS) OF THE NON-SPECIFIC MEASURE TERMS FOUND IN THE ANALYSED TEXTS.

CONTAINER-RELATED MEASURE TERM	18th CENTURY	19th CENTURY	FUL-DERIVATIVES	18th CENTURY	19th CENTURY
bushel	13	15	basinful	—	1
cup	5	320	bowlful	—	4
glass	252	134	boxful	—	1
kettle	28	26	cupful	15	117
pan	54	77	dishful	2	2
pot	50	20	glassful	6	29
spoon	19	62	handful	549	121
TOTAL:	421	654	ladleful	10	5
			mouthful	2	—
			pailful	—	5
			panful	10	4
			plateful	2	1
			potful	4	1

TABLE 4. THE NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES (TOKENS) OF THE NON-SPECIFIC MEASURE TERMS FOUND IN THE ANALYSED TEXTS.					
CONTAINER-RELATED MEASURE TERM	18th CENTURY	19th CENTURY	FUL-DERIVATIVES	18th CENTURY	19th CENTURY
			saucerful	—	1
			spoonful	1,043	2,470
			thimbleful	3	—
			tumblerful	—	2
			tureenful	—	2
			TOTAL:	1,646	2,766

... then straine them out in abason, and take 3 times as *much* sugar as you haue dryed quence, ... (CoWITE18; 1703)

(6) then add a few Leaves of Thyme stripped from the Stalks, a couple of small Onions shred to fine Pieces, half a dozen *Grains* of whole Pepper, and half a Race of Ginger. (CoWITE18; 1750)
Take three onions, two *cloves* of garlic, two ounces of grated horseradish, and a spoonful of salt; (CoWITE19; 1831)
... put it into a saucepan with three onions, a *blade* of mace, or two, and a few pepper-corns cover with water, ... (CoWITE19; 1806)

(7) Mix two *handfuls* of bean-flour with one *handful* of salt, and it will answer the end very well. (CoWITE18; 1795)

(8) ... Two *tablespoonfuls* of Bread-crumbs. One *dessertspoonful* of chopped Parsley. One *teaspoonful* of chopped Herbs. Pepper and Salt. (CoWITE19; 1885)

The non-specific terms appear to be commonly used regardless of the century. They are somewhat imprecise, leaving the decision regarding the amounts to the cook's intuition, knowledge, and taste (e.g., *some, a few, much, a deal of*), see example (9). Some of them refer to the form of the food product (e.g., *a sprig, a blade, a clove*), without specifying the size of the foodstuff, as if the recipe author assumed the proportions of these do not vary significantly enough to influence the taste of the dish. Some collective terms, such as *bunch, bundle, faggot* were also found. Additionally, in both subcorpora, instead of referring to the weight or amount of the foodstuff, the authors mention the value of the product, using terms such as *pennyworth* or *shillingworth*, see example (10).

(9) ... mix *as much* salt *as you judge proper* with eight ounces of bay salt, four ounces of saltpetre, and one pound of coarse sugar, ... (CoWITE19; 1806)
... mince it with a Pound of Beef Suet, and *a good quantity* of Thyme, and Onions; beat it in a Mortar, season it with savory Seasoning, ... (CoWITE18; 1733)

... put a curst at the bottom of your dish, with *a great deal* of butter, and forced meat balls, then season the rooks with salt, pepper, ... (CoWITE18; 1785)

(10) ... & melt therin halfe a pound of good butter and a pound of sugar add therto 4 *peny worth* of saffron dried & powdred, ... (CoWITE18; 1703)
Then take your pan off the fire, and to every pound of sugar, take *sixpence worth* of the oil of cinnamon, ... (CoWITE18; 1791)

A special group of non-specific terms are the container-related terms. Even though in some publications they are treated as a separate category, I have included them in the non-specific category, as the quantities they refer to are by no means precise. As Culpeper wrote, "[w]hat a handful is, is known to all, but how much it is, is known to none" (Spiller 2018, xxxvi).

The majority of these terms are derivatives coined by combining the name of a body part or a container with the suffix *-ful*. The former prevails in 18th-century recipes, as *handful* was used over four times more frequently than a century later. However, this is the only unit of measure which dominates in terms of its frequency over the 19th century material. The later period abounds with container-related terminology, as a greater variety of lexeme types was found in the 19th-century subcorpus than in the 18th century, indicating a greater creativity of the cookbook authors and a broader diversity of measure references. The most frequently used container-related terms in both subcorpora are *cupful* and *spoonful*. Among these measurements, we can distinguish a certain hierarchy, especially in the 19th century, as cookbook authors attempted to differentiate between various container sizes, specifying the measurements, e.g., *dessertspoonful, meat-spoonful, salt-spoonful, tablespoonful, teaspoonful*; or *breakfast-cupful, coffee-cupful, tea-cupful*, etc. (see example (8) above). These compounded terms constitute 72% of all the 19th-century container-related measurements, and only 4% of the 18th-century ones. This suggests that, despite the use of non-specific terminology, the authors of the 19th-century collections attempted to be as precise as possible, opting for kitchen-specific terminology rather than metric systems.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper aimed to analyse two Late Modern English subcorpora, CoWITE18 and CoWITE19, which contain instructional texts representing the 18th and 19th centuries, respectively, in order to examine the terminology applied by the recipe authors to specify the amounts of the ingredients mentioned. The extracted terminology has been divided into two major groups: specific and non-specific terms. The former category comprises weight and measure units used in one of the dry weight measure systems recognised in the UK. The latter category consists of relatively imprecise expressions which either appeal to the reader's intuition, refer to containers typically used in the kitchen, or the value of the ingredients mentioned. The study allows us to draw several conclusions:

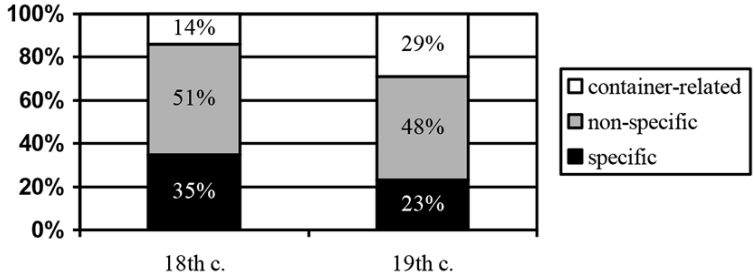

Figure 2. The ratio of occurrence of the measure terminology in the two subcorpora.

Nowhere in the recipes was any specification found regarding the choice of metric system applied by the author. This suggests that, except the three weight units discussed above (*gram, mutchkin* and *peck*), the Avoirdupois Weight System was followed, as this was the system recognised at that time in the UK.

A comparison of the terminology used in the two centuries suggests that specific terminology was preferred in the earlier period, with 35% of measure terms representing this category (see Figure 2). It seems that the 19th-century reduction in the use of specific terms was compensated for by a higher number of container-specific terms. This might indicate that the recipe authors, instead of using the commonly known metric units, turned towards some form of culinary jargon. As indicated by Norrick (1983, 180), "[t]he words *teaspoon*, *tablespoon*, *cup*, *pinch* etc. express meanings in recipes quite different from their everyday meanings in other contexts; hence the vocabulary of recipes is distinct from that of general English", which suggests the development of the culinary jargon. Similarly, Diemer and Frobenius (2013, 77) include non-specific measure terms in what they call "special-purpose vocabulary".

The container-related terms were not only more numerous in terms of tokens in the later subcorpus, but also in terms of the types. This proves that by coining more derivatives, a greater variety of measure terms was introduced, allowing for a larger scope of quantities to be expressed by culinary terminology. Moreover, the most popular of the *ful*-derivatives were compounded in such a way as to create a hierarchy of container sizes, thereby further distinguishing between different measure categories.

To sum up, the study has shown that the trend seems to have been from metric to customary rather than the other way round (as the title of this paper suggests). To answer the questions posed in the Introduction, the 19th-century unification of measure systems did not support precision in the recipes; instead, precision was aimed at by specification of the available kitchen-based terminology. The cook's intuition did not devalue in the 19th century, as the non-specific terms were equally frequent in both centuries.

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