

# Not pork but bacon

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Image courtesy of Mahmoud Al-Mahmoud

Rashid is an overseas graduate student at an Australian university. He is a Muslim from the Middle East, and this is the story of how he inadvertently ate pork during his first week in Australia. New on campus, his office mates asked him to join them for lunch in the university's cafeteria. The cafeteria has a food-court set-up with stalls representing a diversity of cuisines including Chinese, Japanese, Mexican and Turkish. Most of it was unfamiliar to Rashid and he opted for the sandwich stall. There you can have your

sandwich of choice assembled for you by choosing from a variety of bread types, greens, cold cuts and sauces. Rashid asked whether the cold cuts were pork and the friendly food service worker behind the counter answered "No, bacon." So, Rashid had his bacon sandwich and was happily munching it when the conversation turned to a comparison of dietary customs and one of his new friends pointed out to Rashid that in Australia bacon is a type of pork. That's when Rashid's face turned green and he ran for the bathroom. What went wrong here? The authority on Australian English, the *Macquarie Dictionary*, defines "bacon" as "meat from the back and sides of the pig, salted and dried or smoked." Other dictionaries of "center Englishes" such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Merriam Webster*, are in agreement that "bacon" is a form of pig meat. None of these dictionaries mention, as [the Wikipedia entry for "bacon"](#) does, that

*meat from other animals, such as [beef](#), [lamb](#), [chicken](#), [goat](#), or [turkey](#), may also be cut, cured, or otherwise prepared to resemble bacon, and may even be referred to as "bacon". Such use is common in areas with significant [Jewish](#) and [Muslim](#) populations.*

In the Englishes of the Middle East, where the distinction between pork and other types of meat is highly salient, the statement "it's not pork but bacon" thus means "the meat comes from an animal other than pig." I can only speculate what the sandwich service worker was trying to say but imagine that, for her, the contrast was one of preparation. So, "it's not pork but bacon" might have meant "it's not uncured but cured" or something similar. Alternatively, she might have intended to say "We don't call it pork. We call it bacon." – in the way that native speakers sometimes like to teach non-native speakers little lessons. Whatever she meant to say, she was obviously oblivious to the semantic feature of "bacon" that mattered to Rashid.

In a truly inclusive society and a university which explicitly aims to internationalize and where more than a quarter of the student population are overseas students, Rashid should have been spared the experience.

Would it be too much to include awareness of the prohibition against eating pork in Islam in the training of food service workers in a cafeteria where a fair number of the customers are Muslims?

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