

THE LINGUISTIC ETHER

Why do some words and phrases catch on while others don't? There are no set rules. Our language changes all the time depending on taste and trends, and what's happening all around us. As anthropologist Dr. Christine Mallinson puts it, "We repeat what we hear in the 'linguistic ether.'" That elegant phrase inspired this article.

Hello? Hey, y'all. Did you know that the word "hello" only dates back to the 1830s? Before that, the most common English greeting was "Good day." "Hello" was adapted from the similar-sounding "hallo," or "halloo," or "hullo," and it originally meant "Hey!" as in, "Halloo! How much longer will you be in there?" Then, on July 18, 1877, when Thomas Edison created the first sound recording machine, he loudly exclaimed, "Hello!" into the device. When Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone, his choice for a standard greeting was "Ahoy." Edison, the superior marketer of the two, pushed for "Hello," and it caught on quickly. It first appeared in print as a greeting in Mark Twain's 1880 short story "A Telephonic Conversation," in which he writes of the newfangled technology: "I notice that one can always write best when somebody is talking through a telephone close by."

OMG! You might think this shortening of "Oh my God!" was coined in the early 2010s by texting teenagers. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, its digital debut occurred in 1994 in an internet forum when an excited soap opera fan typed "OMG what did it say?" But the exclamation is much older than that. Its first known print appearance was in a 1917 letter from retired British admiral Lord Fisher to Minister of Munitions (and future prime minister) Winston Churchill. Fisher concluded sarcastically with: "I hear that a new order of Knighthood is on the tapis - O.M.G. (Oh! My God!) - Shower it on the Admiralty!!"

Drama + Comedy. Whichever clever wordsmith coined "dramedy" wasn't clever enough to take credit for it. Until etymologists uncover new evidence, the origin will remain "unknown." What is known is that television had featured shows that combined drama and comedy for decades—starting with Jackie Cooper's *Hennesey* in 1959, followed by *M*A*S*H*, *All in the Family*, and *Eight Is Enough* in the 1970s. However, the portmanteau didn't show up until the following decade. Here's an early mention from a 1987 *South Florida Sun Sentinel* article by TV critic Bill Kelley about a show called "*Hooperman*, starring John Ritter as a San Francisco cop," which "inaugurates a new form—the so-called 'dramedy,' a half-hour program mixing elements of sitcom humor with straight drama." That excerpt proves the word was already in use, but who called it that first? (If it was you, give us a call!)

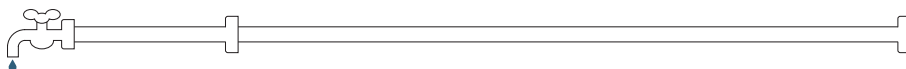
Vatican City is so small that it technically contains 5.9 popes per square mile.

WWWbsites. Today, the internet goes by many names: the web, the Information Superhighway, the Net, online, cyberspace, and others. Back in 1990, internet inventor Tim Berners-Lee considered several official names for his new browser. Among the finalists were “The Information Mesh,” which he rejected because it sounded too much like “mess.” “The Information Mine” was also rejected because it abbreviated to “TIM,” which the humble software developer felt was egotistical. And he rejected “Mine of Information,” or “MOI” (“me” in French), for the same reason. Ultimately, he settled on this one: “World Wide Web,” which is why websites now start with “www” and not “tim” or “moi.”

Verbing the nouns and nouning the verbs. “Just Google it!” “Beer me!” “Let’s party!” If it feels like nouns are undergoing verbification at an alarming rate, it might comfort you to know that *verbification* (a word coined in the 1870s) has actually played a huge part in forming our language. Even William Shakespeare did his fair share of verbifying, such as in this line from *Love’s Labour’s Lost*: “But now to task the tasker.” And 400 years before Facebook, the Bard wrote, “And what so poor a man as Hamlet is / May do, to express his love and friending to you.” Conversely, a lot of nouns began as verbs. That’s what allows us to meet for a drink, have a catch, go for a walk, or get the runs.

Listen up! English used to have a gender-neutral pronoun for “you people”: *ye*—as in “Hear ye, hear ye.” That phrase fell out of use long ago without a real replacement. The closest we have today is the standard callout: “Hey, you guys.” Two replacements that have been bandied about: the gender-neutral phrases “Howdy, folks” and “Hey, y’all”—both of which have been used for more than a century in the American West and South (respectively), but neither has caught on en masse...yet. (“Guy,” by the way, is an *eponym*, a word named after a real person, in this case Guy Fawkes, a British revolutionary. And while the plural “guys” is considered gender-neutral, the singular “guy” is not.)

Goodbye. The next time you hear someone complain about the word-shortening words like “gonna,” “splain,” or “prolly” (which actually dates to the 1940s), remind them that there are no language overlords dictating how words are added to the Linguistic Ether. Half a millennium ago in England, someone was probably complaining, “What is this ‘goodbye’ I’m hearing people say? Everyone knows the proper phrase is ‘God be with ye.’” But it sounded similar to the widely accepted phrase “Good day,” which is why, according to etymologists, it caught on. The original term was a blessing, similar to the Spanish *adiós* and the French *adieu*, both of which translate literally as “to God,” but functionally mean “farewell.” Goodbye!



Food for thought: There are more public libraries in the U.S. than there are McDonald’s restaurants.