

6 Brilliant Acronyms America Gave to the English Language
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Transcript: <https://dontveter.com/ec/lostinthepond.acronyms.pdf>

Once again this entered the English language via the US military. I'm spotting a theme [pattern] here, they like acronyms in the military.

Hello, I'm Lawrence, and I'm on a quest to uncover all of the memos that Britain and America lost in the pond.

And one of those memos pertains to words, right? I think we all know that both countries have different words, some of the same words, sometimes different spellings of the same words, but I'm from a country that thinks we invented all of the words.

That is the English words, of course, we didn't invent most of them, they came from previous languages like French, German, Latin, etc., etc.

But we often specifically don't remember that America contributed to the lexicon as well and there are some very common words that America did indeed give to the English language, chief among those are acronyms.

You all know what an acronym is, right? I don't mean to patronize you on that one but I'm going to anyway.

An acronym is a combination of letters that stands for sort of a wider collection of words but is usually said in this shortened variety and America for whatever reason just seems to be very very good at them.

I almost titled this video British Acronyms Ain't Got Nothing on America but then I just thought that sounded way too far.

So I just kept it to a very simple, list of six acronyms that the United States gave to the English language.

Some of these were very much not on my radar until I moved to the United States, some on the other hand were, especially this one.

That's right, who knew that radar itself was an acronym and not only is it that, it's also a palindrome.

You may have seen that word roaming around the internet recently because we had a palindromic day.

Or radar is, or should I say, was an acronym and it stood for this: RAdio Detection And Ranging.

In other words it came from this idea of being an electronic system for locating objects by means of radio waves and it entered the English language via the US Navy, no less, in 1940 mean that very thing and you know there was.

It did have competition from the British, it almost wasn't called radar at all, we wanted to go with a much longer radio location.

Which, I imagine, would have been shortened at some point anyway and probably would have become radar just by itself or something along those lines.

But the American usage won out and we use it in both countries quite routinely and have done so since World War II and it's become kind of a just a regular noun now.

And we sort of forgotten that it was once an acronym, we don't, we don't, even put periods, or you know, full stops in between each letter, and we write it lowercase.

And, so, it's been downgraded in a way, but I still have a lot of love for that word.

And a lot of what I just said about radar is also true of our next entry.

Oh, yeah, the word scuba, as in scuba diving, is indeed an acronym or should I say again, was.

It entered the English language after radar, but only by a few years later in 1952, and it was the brainchild of one particular man.

His name was Major Christian Lambertson who served in the US Army Medical Corps from 1944 to 1946.

He didn't initially call his diving apparatus scuba as we now know and love it.

Initially he called it this, LARU, which was another acronym, which stood for Lambertson Amphibious Respiratory Units.

Presumably he just, he didn't, he wasn't arrogant and he didn't want his name in there.

I'd have gone with that LARU.

I'm going laru diving, which sounds like something you might do in Hawaii.

But eventually, scuba won out again at his insistence, and the word just like radar has taken off in Britain as well.

So this is not an example of one of those that I only picked up in the United States.

And you'll notice once again, scuba, no periods or full stops in between the letters and they're all lowercase.

All of that previous usage has gone, it's disappeared, it's, it's missing, you might almost say, it's gone awol.

Who remembers the internet in 1996, that was AOL, they've gone AWOL to some extent.

It is, of course, an acronym and it is perhaps more well known as an acronym than the first two entries on this very list.

It means: Absent WithOut Leave and it came from the US military in about the First World War, 1917, to be precise.

That's the first attestation of it and you know at that time not only would it have been recognized as

an acronym but the US military would have sounded out every single letter as in A W O L as in, you know, old Charlie is A W O L.

Eventually by World War II they recognized they could save time during the search for Charlie and say AWOL and that's kind of stuck ever since.

It has indeed made it a little bit into British English.

It's not quite as common there as you might find scuba or radar but it does have some presence nonetheless, possibly when we are mimicking Americans.

But when it comes to mimicry of American acronyms, we usually reserved it for our next entry.

And that's because in Britain, to this very day we still sound out the letters A S A P when saying this very phrase.

Which you know is somewhat ironic because that's not saying it as quick as possible.

Of course, Americans know that and they say ASAP and they have the high ground here by which to do so because they in fact coined that very acronym.

In fact, to be very specific, the US military is believed to have done so.

Indeed the first written reference to it comes in this book by Captain Anise G Thompson.

He was a veteran of the Korean War and that dates this word back to the 1950s but a few years before that the second-best acronym that I ever acquired after moving to the United States was born.

So I'll be honest, when I first heard the word, fubar, I thought I was being taken to some sort of drinking establishment that was a little untoward.

Until, that is, it was explained to me that fubar is itself an acronym and it means, and I hope my mum isn't watching, F****ed Up Beyond All Recognition.

Once again, this entered the English language via the US military.

I'm spotting a ~~theme~~ [pattern] here, they like acronyms in the military and they specifically like ones that give off a negative connotation it seems, and once again is sort of fallen into general usage.

Americans might use it, not even sort of referring back to the acronym itself but just now recognizing it to mean that you know this is, it's damaged beyond repair.

But in Britain this one didn't really make it.

I mean, we don't see many instances of this usage over there.

This is not quite the case with our final acronym which also enjoys the responsibility of being my favorite since I've moved to the United States.

Yes, snafu which is the perfect word to describe that previous transition, it means basically Situation Normal All F****ed Up.

Which is to suggest that my transitions are always terrible and that you should expect it by now.

Because as the OED puts it, an expression conveying the common soldiers laconic acceptance of the disorder of war and the ineptitude of his superiors. (OED = Oxford English Dictionary)

But to complete the pattern, where did this acronym come from? It came from the United States, but not just the United States.

I think you know by now they came from the United States military.

It's first attested from 1942, so the Second World War.

Even by the United States definition it's often euphemized to include the word, fouled, instead, so Situation Normal All Fouled Up.

I just, I use the swear word because because of copper, mostly, but now the word snafu in just very simple noun form could just mean something's a mess.

And once again if you could go back and forth, people may or may not use it nowadays without that knowledge of its former acronym life.

But one thing I can say is, it is mostly more common in the United States but it has found some currency back in Britain as you can see.

That's it for this episode, thank you for tuning in. Let me know in the comments below what your favorite acronyms are.

They don't, they don't, have to be American, you know they could be could be Danish.

Let me know your favorite Danish acronyms. This could be fun, who knows, I could have just stumbled upon something that I didn't intend there.

If you would like to keep up with me on a day-to-day basis, creepy, then you can do so on Twitter at [lostinthepondus](#).

And finally a big shout out to all my patrons without who none of this would be possible.

You know, the support of my patrons really, really, is important.

Without that I can't, I can't, justify the research time that I put into this, or, or, even the video editing time that I put into it.

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Again, some of the perks you'll get for doing so is access to my secret livestream.

And anybody that pledges five dollars or more a month will get access to not only that, but my secret podcast and more.

Until next time, I'm gonna go AWOL not I mean it's not without I've given myself leave so it doesn't really care its absent, I'm just going absent.

Bye, thank you for watching this episode of Lost in the Pond.

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LED = Light Emitting Diode

Nasa = National Aeronautics and Space Administration

Nato = North Atlantic Treaty Organization

I think laser (Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation) should be on your list, if for no other reason than lasers are cool!

I love the acronym "fubar," but I've felt it should be a Spanish verb. fubo, fubas, fuba, fubamos, fubais, fuban

Fun fact: an acronym is the letters pronounced as a word, initialism is when you pronounce the letters separately

As a new employee at a state agency, I was given a list of their most commonly used acronyms. It was 23 pages long

TARFU either means "Things Are Really F***ed Up" or "Totally And Royally F***ed Up". I only ever heard it used at the Texas A&M Corps of Cadets while most of my military slang was learned elsewhere before Uni, so I would categorize it as kinda niche.

A favorite of mine that, yes, I learned in the U.S. military is "WOMBAT". It's short for "Waste Of Money, Brains And Time".

Taser is an acronym as well...Thomas A Smith Electric Rifle. Came from a sci-fi novel that law enforcement adopted when they developed tasers for a less-lethal option.

My favorite has always been FUBAR. However, I was speaking to some of my younger co-workers about a program that we once used and I said it was a DOS based program. They looked at me like I was insane, then I remembered that they grew up using computers. The computer industry has given us a lot of acronyms... ROM, RAM, JPEG, GIF, ASCII, AIM, etc.

Swat - Special Weapons And Tactics, CARE package - Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe

A few more examples: GUI (pronounced "gooey,") WYSIWYG (pronounced "wizy-wig") , NASA and SWAT. Some of my favorite acronyms that remain true acronyms and aren't said like words are TLC (Tender Loving Care) and TCB (Taking Care of Business.)

I'm surprised that GPS didn't make it onto this list

The French also love a good acronym. For instance, R.S.V.P stands for “repondez-vous s’il vous plaît”. Literally translated it means “please respond”. But of course that doesn’t look as good on a wedding invitation.

Telegraph operators created the first acronym. People had to pay by the letter for telegrams, so shortening what could be shortened was economical. Telegraph operators shortened 'President of the United States' to POTUS, which is used even more today. That was in the late 19th century, and it was the 20th century before acronyms began to become more widespread.

Technically, AWOL means Absent Without Official Leave, but that's a quibble. Shortly after radar, there was sonar (SOund Navigation And Ranging), yet another US military acronym although the base technology was designed by the UK

An old favorite of mine: NIMBY (nim-bee). Meaning "Not In My Backyard"! Used in reference to something that people don't want in their community, ie: a casino, a prison, a landfill, etc.

In the IT industry, we have PEBCAK: Problem Exists Between Chair And Keyboard.

One of my favorites comes from (I believe) sci-fi author Robert A. Heinlein in his book, *The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress*: TANSTAAFL, meaning, There Ain't No Such Thing As A Free Lunch.

ACRONYM: A Contrived Reduction Of Names Yielding Mnemonics. (This is actually a backronym.)

I'm surprised you didn't mention "OK". That's gotta be the most successful American acronym of all time. (debatable, from oll korrekt?)

That's a great one. Almost every language on Earth now uses OK or okay, which would probably shock the long-gone editors of the Boston Morning Post when they coined it as an inside joke for their readers 175 years ago.

Actually, OK is not really acronym No one knows what, if anything the two letters stand for. We just have some wild guesses. It's just known world wide what OK means.

Not only is the military good at turning words into letters but they also have a knack for turning letters into words (bravo, charlie, alpha, etc.)

Actually, "fubar" came out of Allies' soldiers during WWII having trouble pronouncing the German word "furchtbar" which basically means "awful" or "terrible" or "horrible" etc. The idiotic acronym was attached to the idiotic spelling much later by some anonymous clever fellow - after the word experienced a resurgence of popular interest as a result of its use in the movie "Saving Private Ryan", where the script actually makes a joke out of an American character's bewilderment after being told its a German word. Despite being fluent in the German language the soldier somewhat humorously is not able to recall or identify any such word in German because the popular English pronunciation of the original German word was so mangled and so - shall we say - "furchtbar". Hah-hah. See? So you've got that particular entry on your list completely wrong TWICE - wrong on its history and wrong in claiming a bogus identification of it as an acronym. How do I know all this? German civilians who were present at the Allied liberation and postwar occupation wryly recounted how silly the American soldier's pronunciation of the German word for "terrible" was. The first time I heard the story was when an uncle related it in a conversation I overheard when I was a kid in the early 1960's.

When I was an FMF Corpsman in the US Navy in Iraq, I was fond of telling my Marine buddies that MARINE was actually an acronym for "Muscles Are Required, Intelligence Not Essential".

"Fubar" and "snafu" are just such great words. When unfurled, they surprise people and make them giggle. But they're also cultural heavyweights at the same time, capturing a very real, memorable, exasperating or even painful experience arising due to the exigencies of military service: lots of people trying to do complicated things on the fly, often in dangerous situations.