

How 'OK' took over the world

It crops up in our speech dozens of times every day, although it apparently means little. So how did the word "OK" conquer the world, asks Allan Metcalf.

"OK" is one of the most frequently used and recognised words in the world.

It is also one of the oddest expressions ever invented. But this oddity may in large measure account for its popularity.

It's odd-looking. It's a word that looks and sounds like an abbreviation, an acronym.

We generally spell it OK - the spelling okay is relatively recent, and still relatively rare - and we pronounce it not "ock" but by sounding the names of the letters O and K.

Visually, OK pairs the completely round O with the completely straight lines of K.

So both in speech and in writing OK stands out clearly, easily distinguished from other words, and yet it uses simple sounds that are familiar to a multitude of languages.

Almost every language has an O vowel, a K consonant, and an A vowel. So OK is a very distinctive combination of very familiar elements. And that's one reason it's so successful. OK stands apart.

Ordinarily a word so odd, so distinctive from others, wouldn't be allowed in a language to begin with. As a general rule, a language allows new words only when they resemble familiar ones.

Clever coinages may be laughed at and enjoyed, but hardly ever adopted by users of the language.

So it was in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, in the late 1830s, when newspaper editors

enjoyed inventing fanciful abbreviations, like "WOOOFC" for "with one of our first citizens" and OW for "all right".

Needless to say, neither of these found a permanent place in the language. But they provided the unusual context that enabled the creation of OK.

On 23 March 1839, OK was introduced to the world on the second page of the Boston Morning Post, in the midst of a long paragraph, as "o.k. (all correct)".

How this weak joke survived at all, instead of vanishing like its counterparts, is a matter of lucky coincidence involving the American presidential election of 1840.

One candidate was nicknamed Old Kinderhook, and there was a false tale that a previous American president couldn't spell properly and thus would approve documents with an "OK", thinking it was the abbreviation for "all correct".

Within a decade, people began actually marking OK on documents and using OK on the telegraph to signal that all was well. So OK had found its niche, being easy to say or write and also distinctive enough to be clear.

But there was still only restricted use of OK. The misspelled abbreviation may have implied illiteracy to some, and OK was generally avoided in anything but business contexts, or in fictional dialogue by characters deemed to be rustic or illiterate.

Indeed, by and large American writers of fiction avoided OK altogether, even those like Mark Twain who freely used slang.

But in the 20th Century OK moved from margin to mainstream, gradually becoming a staple of nearly everyone's conversation, no longer looked on as illiterate or slang.

Its true origin was gradually forgotten. OK used such familiar sounds that speakers of other languages, hearing it, could rethink it as an expression or abbreviation in their own language.

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International OKs

- * Native American Choctaw: Okeh - it is so
- * Scottish: Och aye - oh yes
- * Greek: Ola kala - all is right
- * German: ohne Korrektur - without [need for] correction
- * Finnish: Oikea - correct
- * Mandinka: O ke - that's it

Fonte: BBC News - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-12503686>
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