OK: The improbable story of America's greatest word, by Allan Metcalf, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, 224 pp. £18.95, ISBN10: 0195377931

There are a number of good reasons for reading *OK*. Anyone with only a passing interest in language will be engaged by this witty, enjoyable account of the origins of OK, as well as the competing theories about its beginnings. Allan Metcalf has devoted serious attention to the archival evidence for its improbable origins as a joking, deliberately-misspelled abbreviation for the phrase 'all correct', rendered as 'oll korrect', which first entered the English language in written form on 23 March 1839 in the *Boston Morning Post*.

Many alternative theories of the origins of OK, including the attribution to Martin VanBuren's nickname '**O**ld Kinderhook", or to Andrew Jackson's inability to spell correctly, or to phrases from Choctaw, German, Scots English, or French are all considered and dismissed for lack of evidence. One of the most convincing bits of support for Metcalf's claim is the impressive number of examples of its early usage which feature the parenthetical explanation: (all correct) beside the actual instance of a written OK. This suggests that people really were thinking about its meaning in this way. It also makes a great deal of sense that it originated from 'all correct' if we consider that such a general meaning is congenial with a grammatical category, evidentiality, which occurs in many languages around the world, and which specifies a speaker's basis for certainty when making a claim about something. Yet, as Metcalf shows, this word has come to mean so much more.

He meticulously follows the progress of this new expression, shadowing its usage in subsequent years. We are given a wide range of portraits featuring OK in politics, literature and business. Readers can witness the fascinating transformations in its meaning, from its strange origins as a whimsical coinage meant to communicate a kind of simplicity of character, to its journey toward acceptability from the fringes and well into the center of everyday discourse. OK has a value-neutral connotation in the early twentieth century which becomes part of an expressive breeziness that lays the groundwork for its role within an emerging American cultural attitude which embraced tolerance and diversity. OK's role in this new attitude is reinforced by the tremendous success of Thomas A. Harris's pop psychology hit, *I'm OK; You're OK*.

How did this word manage to embed itself so successfully into the English language? This is the great mystery, which is only partly illuminated by some of the explanations we are given. Metcalf states that a faddish enjoyment of abbreviations on the part of newspaper editors at the time of its coinage, not unlike the current trend among texters, must have had something to do with its early success. Other types of explanations, however, make me realize that this book is meant to be read by people who are curious about language, but not necessarily linguistically trained. He states, for example, that the letter k is "the most striking letter of the English alphabet (p.77)". This is a fascinating claim, but it is not one that a linguist would typically make.

Metcalf is an unapologetic champion for OK and it is always nice to see people advocating passionately for a word or expression. At times, however, it does seem as if he is attempting to make a sales pitch for a product by packaging it within an attractive set of images. We are given poetic descriptions of the possibly widespread usage of OK around the world, as the following extract reveals:

> Nowadays OK has spread to numerous languages of the world. From pole to pole, from the precincts of Paris to the homes of Hong Kong, from the plains of Serengeti to the steppes of Siberia, from the tip of Tierra del Fuego to the top of Mount Everest, wherever humans discourse in whatever language, it may well be punctuated with OK (p.171.)

Metcalf is also on thin ice when he attributes the alleged universal success of OK to the fact that its sounds (namely, the o vowel, the k consonant, and the a vowel) are widely present in the world's languages:

> Nearly every language in the world has not only these three sounds but allows them to be combined in that sequence . . ." (p.79).

While it may be true that the k consonant is present in most languages of the world, the same cannot be said of the o and a vowels. In fact, the low central vowels, such as that found in the written 'a' within the word 'father', are the most frequent in the world's languages. Moreover, his claims for OK's universal appeal do not seem at all necessary and could be seen to detract from his main point, which is that OK represents a unique kind of American quirkiness, and cultural open-mindedness.

Despite these picky criticisms, I strongly recommend this book because it has the potential to stimulate much needed interest in the workings of language. The study of language from a nonliterary perspective, a perspective that is studiously ignored by most United States high schools, needs to be pursued at earlier moments in our educational experience. Many students who graduate from high school never have an opportunity to take a class in linguistics, even if they do go on to college or university programs of study. Our lack of linguistic knowledge and training represents a serious deficit within our educational system, as knowledge about language is fundamental for the kind of critical thinking that is necessary but woefully lacking among our general populace.

Anyone can appreciate, after reading Metcalf's book, that the workings of language are a stupendous mystery and that none of us as individuals can claim credit for linguistic innovation. An editor may have invented OK, but the rest of us had to adopt it and ratify it by using it in new ways, for it to become a part of our language. This book could be, and should be, read by all kinds of people who are curious about how and why language changes. It would make a great text for a high school English class, a class on American history, an undergraduate general education class, or an undergraduate class on the history of the English language.

Janis Nuckolls
Department of Linguistics and English Language
Brigham Young University
janis_nuckolls@byu.edu

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08109028.2013.786270