

# OK... so just what are the origins of this quirky word?

Peter  
Trudgill



email: [newsdesk@archant.co.uk](mailto:newsdesk@archant.co.uk)

People quite often ask about the word "okay". "Where does it come from?", they ask. "What does OK stand for?"

There's quite a lot of controversy about these questions, which is inconvenient since OK is one of the most successful English words of all time, having spread to all varieties of English around the world, where it's in very frequent use, and into very many other languages as well.

The truth is that etymologists, the sort of academic people who write about the origins of words for the Oxford English Dictionary and other learned tomes, are a bit out of their comfort zone on this one.

They tend to know a great deal about Latin and Ancient Greek and Sanskrit words. They are very well versed in Proto-Indo European and Proto Germanic vocabulary.

They know all about Old Norse and Old English. But they are a bit stumped over the word OK.

The strongest suggestion they have come up with is that it was a jocular American abbreviation of "All Correct" – as in Orin Korrekt. Well, it was certainly originally American: the first definite records we have of it in print come from the USA in the 1830s.



■ 'OK' is seen as quintessentially American but its origins may actually lie in West Africa.

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But there's another theory which appeals to me. There's actually a probable earlier recorded instance of "okay" from the 1700s, from North Carolina.

And what was special about the southeastern states of the USA at that time was slavery: there were large numbers of unfortunate human beings in that part of the world who had been forcibly carried across the Atlantic against their will from West Africa.

Obviously they brought their West African languages with them.

Now it has to be said that most European etymologists do not know very much about West African languages.

But one linguist who does, Dr David Dalby from the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University, pointed out more than 40 years ago that the origin of OK probably lay in the Wolof language of Senegal.

In Wolof, waw-kay means very much the same as OK: and Wolof is rather likely to have been used as a lingua franca or common language among African slaves with different mother tongues.

This usage was then transferred to their English as they learned it – and later found its way into the English of white people, who tried to make sense of it by writing it OK. For me, that's a waw-kay explanation.