

ORIGIN

OF THE WORD:

"OK"

Compiled by
Campbell M Gold
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What is the origin of the word "OK"?

There have been numerous attempts to explain the emergence of this curious colloquial expression, which seems to have swept into popular use in the US during the mid-19th century. Most of them are undoubtedly pure speculation. It does not seem at all likely, from the linguistic and historical evidence, that it derives from the Scots expression 'och aye', the Greek *ola kala* ('it is good'), the Choctaw Indian *oke* or *okeh* ('it is so'), the French *aux Cayes* ('from Cayes', a port in Haiti with a reputation for good rum) or *au quai* ('to the quay', as supposedly used by French-speaking dockers), or the initials of a railway freight agent called Obediah Kelly who is said to have written them on lading documents he had checked.

The oldest written references to 'OK' result from its adoption as a slogan by the Democratic party during the American Presidential election of 1840. Their candidate, President Martin Van Buren, was nicknamed 'Old Kinderhook' (after his birthplace in New York State), and his supporters formed the 'OK Club'.

This undoubtedly helped to popularize the term (though it did not get President Van Buren re-elected!). During the late 1830s there had been a brief but widespread craze in the US for humorous misspellings, and the form *orl korrekt* which was among them could explain the initials 'OK'. Such a theory has been supported by more than one distinguished American scholar, and is given in many dictionaries, including Oxford dictionaries.

The only other theory with at least a degree of plausibility is that the term originated among Black slaves of West African origin, and represents a word meaning 'all right, yes indeed' in various West African languages. Unfortunately, historical evidence enabling the origin of this expression to be finally and firmly established may be hard to unearth.

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The etymology of OK was masterfully explained by the distinguished Columbia University professor Allen Walker Read in a series of articles in the journal *American Speech* in 1963 and 1964.

The letters stand for "oll korrekt." They're the result of a fad for comical abbreviations that flourished in the late 1830s and 1840s.

Read buttressed his arguments with hundreds of citations from newspapers and other documents of the period. To date, his work has never been successfully challenged.

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Other possible explanations include:

- OK stands for "all correct" or the illiterate phrase "Orl Korrekt."
- U.S. President Martin Van Buren's nickname "Old Kinderhook" -- OK for short. He was a native of Kinderhook, N.Y.
- Choctaw word "okeh", (or "hoke") meaning "indeed" (or "It is so.")
- Orrin Kendall biscuits, which soldiers ate during the Civil War.
- Short for Aux Cayes, a Haitian port that American sailors praised for its rum.
- Old Keokuk, a Native American tribal chief who was said to have signed treaties with his initials.
- Scottish "auch aye", meaning "ah yes." (Or "och aye", meaning "okay.")
- From the French maritime phrase "au quai" meaning "at dock", and therefore at last safe from the ravages of the open sea.
- 'O killed' - the report of the night's death toll during the First World War.
- All clear after the shoot-out at O.K. Corral.
- Instruments calibrated at an Observatory at Kew had, affixed to them, a stamp, or impression, to authenticate that calibration. This stamp was O K - Observatory Kew.
- The abbreviation is for Oberst Kommandant, German for "Colonel in Command", used by either -- take your pick -- a General Schliessen or Baron von Steuben when initialing letters and orders during the American Revolution.
- It comes from the name of a freight agent, Obadiah Kelly, whose initials were widely disseminated on bills of lading.
- The abbreviation is for Open Key, popularized by telegraphers in the 1860s.
- It comes from the names of Lords Onslow and Kilbracken, who initialed bills after they were read and approved in England's House of Lords.
- From a misreading of "Order Recorded" on official documents.
- From the Finnish "oikea", meaning "correct".
- From the Greek "Ola Kala", meaning "everything's fine".
- From the German the expression "Ohne Korrekten", meaning "without correction".

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The following passage is from the book, "*By the Flow of the Inland River - The Settlement of Columbus, Mississippi to 1825*", by Samuel H. Kaye, Rufus Ward, Jr., and Carolyn B. Neault. Columbus, MS 1992.

"...During the Creek War the Choctaws, principally under the leadership of Pushmataha, not only sided with the Americans but contributed 500 men to Andrew Jackson's army (Niles 1-1-1824) - Although the Creek war was over, the Choctaw contingent would help the Americans in one last battle. In January, 1815, tradition has it that Pushmataha and his warriors, while serving under Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans, gave a lasting contribution to the English Language. During the battle, Jackson is said to have asked Pushmataha if the fight against the British was going well for the Choctaw detachment. Pushmataha supposedly answered with a Choctaw word which meant that things were all right. Jackson liked the word and began using it himself. The word was OK. According to the Dictionary of Word Origins, the favored source for the symbol OK " - the Choctaw word OKEH, "it is so".

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