

Do you speak my language?

by BRIAN LOCKHART

There are times when I wonder how anyone learning English as a second language can ever figure it out.

It comes naturally if you grow up speaking the language, but for many people who have a different language as their mother tongue, it must be confusing.

You 'threw' a ball, and you also went 'through' customs. You 'ate' a meal and have a collection of 'eight' things. You have a wedding 'band' on your finger and play ukulele in a 'band.' You 'cite' a quote, then go to the 'site' to check on your construction project.

And that list goes on. It must be very confusing for a person trying to learn the language.

I had a friend who was Polish, and we used to have lunch together all the time.

She told me that when she first moved to Canada and heard of a spelling bee at her son's school, she couldn't believe it.

She thought, 'Why would you have to have a contest to spell words?'

Then, when she started learning English and became fluent, she understood why English-speaking countries host spelling bees.

English is a language that is constantly changing. So much so that new words are officially added to the dictionary every year. A lot of that comes from words that become trendy and are adopted in the lexicon.

On top of that, we use more acronyms than any other language. I used to work for a large company where acronyms were the norm and not always for the good.

We had an outside contractor who came to our office on a regular basis. He told me he couldn't understand what people were talking about half the time because we used so many acronyms, unless you were a part of the lingo, you had no idea what they meant.

Several years ago, I noticed radio commercials developed a peculiar but common way of advertising retail products.

They would say, 'Come into our store, and buy your new widget, and pay later, OAC!'

It wasn't just one company using this phrase. Anyone who offered products with payments yelled OAC at the end.

It turns out OAC means 'on approved credit.'

I'm not sure if this is an advertising regulation or a legal thing, but they still do it. Why not just say they will sell you a product on payments, but you must have 'approved credit.'

I wonder how many people arrived at a store hoping to buy a new sofa, only to be turned down because they didn't have the appropriate credit? If they knew what OAC was in the first place, maybe they would have decided to save up for that new piece of furniture before buying.

There are a lot of buzzwords that get tossed about and become trendy so much so that they get overused and, half the time, don't make any sense.

A couple of years ago, the word 'system' became trendy and way overused. Everybody was suddenly selling a system of some sort, even if their product didn't have any kind of system at all.

There was a well-known national bedding company that advertised on the radio. They came out with a commercial telling you that you need to have the best mattress for your 'sleep system.'

Sleep system? It's not a 'system.' It's a mattress, it's flat, and you lay on it. There is no system involved at all.

I did notice, however, that they stopped using that phrase rather quickly and started referring to their products in more common sense terms.

I'm pretty sure some bigwig in the company heard the radio spot and realized how stupid it was to refer to a mattress as a system and told them to pull the plug on that kind of advertising.

The latest thing is to add an 'S' to the word 'support.'

I started noticing this past year, when getting press releases, that agencies and organizations started referring to their 'supports,' with an extra 'S' at the end. Now I have commercials on my Youtube feed where people are saying, 'we're grateful for the supports we have.'

I didn't get the memo on this. When did it become necessary to pluralize this word with an 'S'?

The word 'support' is already plural, as in 'thank you ALL for your support.'

It's a funny language.

I'm glad I grew up speaking it and didn't have to try to figure out it all out later!