

# Ham Babble: Making sense of the bands

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By and large, amateurs are an articulate, well-spoken and intelligent lot. However when tuning the bands, one sometimes hears some strange contortions of the English language. This twisted terminology perplexes the newcomer and grates on the ears of the experienced operator.

Neither necessary to explain a technical concept nor useful to express a new thought, insight or observation, there are various terms and expressions unique to radio amateurs. Their inappropriate use makes amateurs sound strange to the uninitiated and hinder clear communication. If you've just got on the air, read this article and avoid the phrases listed unless you really mean them. If you count yourself as one of the uninitiated, treat this list as a guide to understand what the babblers on the bands are really saying.

I have attempted to go beyond a simple listing of words to identify specific patterns of communication unique to amateurs. For example you will be introduced to *Amateur Action words*, *Intention Phrases* and *Sign-Off words*. Many of the terms used by amateurs can be placed into one of these groupings. Their existence may tell us something about the personality of amateur operators, who have many more words to announce their intention to end a conversation than to welcome a station with which contact has just been established. Then there's specific patterns such as *Lengthening words* and *Regurgitating Rogers*. The topic is ripe for further study - is there a psychologist in our ranks who is willing to conduct a content analysis of amateur communication and report the findings?

The following list has been derived from both personal observation and suggestions from others. Additions would of course be welcome and can be sent to the author.

**Affirmative:** Yes. An example of a *lengthening word*. Also see *negative*.

**Amateur Action words:** Except when they are trying to climb towers, amateurs are generally a sedentary lot

(‘Another cuppa – thanks Dear’). However on air hams like to convey the impression of being on the move – hence the constant use of ‘going’ as in ‘going clear’ or ‘went’ as in ‘went QRT’. *Getting out* and ‘coming back’ are other *amateur action words* occasionally heard.

**Best 73:** 73 means best wishes, so best 73 must mean best best wishes! It has entered such common use that complaining about this is probably futile.

**Break (Break):** An abrupt and impolite way of interrupting a conversation already in progress. It’s much better to simply insert your callsign in the breaks between transmissions that all good operators leave.

**Breaker:** An import from CB. Even worse than *break*. Fortunately rare on the amateur bands.

**Device:** George Orwell’s NewSpeak replaces established terms with specific meaning with general terms of less specific meaning. The result is awkward communication that doesn’t get to the point. The word *device* is an example of this misuse. Someone who asks if they are ‘making it into the *device*’ really wants to know if they have a decent signal through the repeater. Repeater is not

much longer to say than *device*, but carries a more specific and accurate meaning.

(see you) **Further down the log:** HamBabble for later. Remains popular, even though most amateurs don't keep logs nowadays. *Further down the curly cord* or *further down the power bill* are variants, possibly borrowed from CB. All are common *sign-off words*. Adding 'will' converts them into *intention phrases*.

**Getting out:** Transmitting and being heard. An SWR reading of 1:1 does not always mean that you're *getting out*. Your coaxial cable might be very lossy, or you're transmitting into a dummy load.

**Go:** A terse contraction of 'go ahead'. Occasionally used on the amateur bands. A variant is found on 27 MHz, where the 'o' sound is extended and raised in pitch. It's quite entertaining – have a listen one day!

**Going:** Another *amateur action word*. Unless you're mobile, you're not going anywhere! Why is it that amateurs are often 'going clear', 'going QRT', or, heaven forbid, 'going thataway'? Often turned into an *intention phrase*, eg 'will go clear', etc. Over-used.

**Intention phrases:** Amateurs often prefer to say that they intend to say something rather than actually saying it. What's wrong with us – is the overuse of intention phrases an unrecognised form of mike-shyness? *Will say 73* is the most common intention phrase you'll hear, closely followed by 'will go clear' – also an example of an *amateur action word*.

**It:** What is *it*? I don't know. Ask those who are always handing 'it' over to you or putting 'it' down. Once you have the answer, let me know.

**Lengthening words:** Often used in phonetics – most commonly Victor Kilowatt rather than Victor Kilo. Also *affirmative* and *negative* rather than yes or no. Presumably the repeated consonant sounds in the longer words kicks the needle on the linear amplifier higher up the scale. The average power is higher and the signal cuts through the static better. When said very quickly with non-standard phonetics and the speech processor wound up you will succeed at making yourself as unintelligible as any other DX hound on 20 metres.

(VK....) **Listening:** A weak euphemism for calling CQ

used on VHF/UHF FM. Common on repeaters for no logical reason, and even sanctioned in published operating guidelines. Like *intention phrases*, it's another example of amateurs not saying what they really mean.

**Negative:** Does not only mean the black power lead on your transceiver. Like *affirmative*, it is an example of a *lengthening word*. *Negatory* is the CB variant, almost extinct these days.

**Over and out:** Though popular in movies, these two words mean two different things, and should never be used together. 'Over' is an invitation to transmit. 'Out' means 'clear', QRT, 'pulling the big switch' or any of a multitude of other terms.

**Over words:** When conditions are good and operators know each other's voice and intonations, the term 'over' can be dispensed with. Over isn't the only word used to pass *it* to the other station – some use the equally respectable 'go ahead' or the in-your-face 'back'. Some HF DXers say 'over over' (said slowly), which may have some merit when signals are weak. See *Lengthening words*.

**Personal:** Normally pertains to matters that are private or not of interest to other people. However some newcomers use it as a jargonish alternative to the plain ‘name’. Handle is similar, but is more accepted in amateur ranks than *personal*, which is popular on CB. However not everyone likes *handle*; heard recently on 40 metres was the comment ‘I don’t have a *handle*, I have a name’.

**Place words:** If amateurs are going to be constantly on the move (see *amateur action words*) it makes sense for there to be places to move between. That’s why there is a need for the amateur lexicon to feature the words ‘here’ and ‘there’. ‘The name here is Bob’. Does Bob carry a deed poll form in his pocket and change his name when he goes somewhere? If not, the ‘here’ is superfluous. The famous British spy did not say ‘The name *here* is Bond - James Bond’. Neither should you.

**Put it down (with):** Something your vet might advise should be done with your ailing dog. However it’s yet another sign-off word. Presumably the ‘*it*’ is a hand microphone, and you’re *putting it down* when you finish. Also see *it*.

**QRZ the breaker:** An ugly embellishment of plain old QRZ? Who is calling? is the plain language version.

**QSL:** The meaning of this term has broadened from the original acknowledgement of receipt of message (presumably one does not have to understand the message content as in *roger*) to almost a synonym for yes or *affirmative*. ‘Are you running 100 watts?’ ‘*QSL QSL*’. Also see *roger* and *regurgitating roger*.

**QSL question:** We don’t seem to send as many QSL cards as we used to, but *QSL* remains popular in amateur parlance. QSL is sometimes appended to yes/no questions to which the answer of QSL is desired. Example: ‘Your QTH Perth, QSL?’ When signals are poor, stations may go through several iterations of repeating callsigns to each other until ‘QSL QSL’, is heard, which means that stations have received each other’s callsign correctly, or are too lazy to care. Given that the meaning of QSL relates to acknowledging receipt of messages, the *QSL question* is quite legitimate and is probably not true HamBabble. It only appears here because it’s overused at times. A close relation is the *roger question*.

(Can I have a) **Radio check?:** A question asked by those who would like to know if they are *getting out* but are uninterested in holding a full conversation with those on the frequency. The usual response is ‘you’re working’.

The question is common on CB, where it probably fulfils a useful role on a busy repeater. Use on the amateur bands identifies the questioner as either a pirate or someone who hasn't listened much before talking.

(the) **Regurgitating Roger**: It's a good idea to confirm salient details with your contact when conditions are poor, but occasionally people go overboard, even when signals are strong. Sometimes you hear almost a playback of your last transmission, punctuated by *roger* between each item. Example: 'Roger your name is Peter, roger on the QTH, roger that you're running ten watts, roger on the FT-301S, roger on the new dipole, roger on the 15 degrees, roger that you're off to work soon, et cetera'. It's boring, repetitive, and tells you nothing you don't already know. The 'regurgitating QSL', is used in a similar manner.

**Roger**: Message received and understood, but also used to mean yes or affirmative. It's not unlike the CBer's 10-4, use of which has diminished greatly since the 1970s. See also *regurgitating roger*.

**Roger question**: Like *QSL*, *roger* is used as a question if given a questioning intonation at the end of a transmission. This can sound quite odd, as in 'Your name is Justin, *roger?*' Those using the *roger question* appear

to invite their contact to reply by saying either *roger*, *roger*, *affirmative* or *negative*.

**Roger dodger:** A pretentious version of Roger. Let's kill this one off, *roger*?

**Roger that (or Roger there):** Just plain roger will do.

**Romeo:** Part of the phonetic alphabet for the letter 'R'. However it's also misused to mean *roger*.

**See you:** Unless you use amateur television, saying that I'll see you *further down the log* can't possibly be true. In radio talk, when you speak to someone, you 'see' them.

**73s:** 73 is an old telegraphic abbreviation for best wishes. Is 73s twice as good? If so, should we wish people 146 to save them from having to do the mental arithmetic themselves? A variant is 'seven-threes', to which the correct reply should be 21.

**Sign-off words:** Of any fraternity in the world, radio amateurs must be the one with the largest number of words that mean ceasing transmission or saying goodbye.

These are often combined to result in a sign-off that is almost as long as the original contact. An example: ‘*Will let you go and I’ll pull the big switch this end. 73s for now and see you further down the log*’. This is repeated several times in turn until everyone signs. Strangely enough we don’t have nearly as many initial greeting words. Does this imply that almost as soon contact is established (confirming that equipment is working but without lowering oneself to ask for a *radio check*) most amateurs are itching to end the conversation ASAP?

**This end:** A crude telephone can be made with two jam tins and a piece of taut string. You talk into your end and your partner hears you at his end. Someone famous once said that radio operates the same way except there is no string. But the ends remain, and amateurs are incessantly talking about things happening *this end*. See *place words*.

**This way:** A similar *place word* to *this end*. According to Ron VK3OM the term appeared to originate with Australian amateurs, spread to New Zealand, and came in to use by UK stations about 5 years ago. If there is a *this way*, there must also be a *that way*. And indeed there is as in ‘What’s the name *that way*?’.

**We:** Hams should realise that they don’t just mumble into

microphones on the end of curly cords – they are actually in control of an Amateur Radio Station. See the Regulations if in doubt. And any self-respecting radio station must surely have a staff of more than one. If it doesn't, make it sound as if it is does. Maybe that's why amateurs talk about their station activities as 'we', as in 'We are operating an FT-1000MP and homebrew linear running 400 watts to a five element monoband yagi at 25 metres. We will QSL via the bureau'?

**Will let you go:** Another *intention phrase*. A series of *sign off words* invariably follows. The implication is that your audience has just been given a long earbashing by you. You've run out of things to say, so want the contact to end in a dignified manner. What better than ostentatiously parading your consideration for others by generously granting your contact their freedom by uttering 'Will let you go'?

**Will say 73:** The most common *intention phrase*. Why do amateurs announce their intention to wish others best wishes more often than they actually give these wishes?

**Will sign:** Another *intention phrase*. When spoken, it sometimes sounds like a threat. See *will let you go*.

## Conclusion

Well, *we've* exceeded the word limit *this way*, so *will let you go*, and pull the big switch *this end*. We'll give you *best 73s*, *put it down* for now and catch you *further down the curly cord*. Hope to *see you* on the *device* again some time soon, *roger?*

## Acknowledgements

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## Postscript

There was a big response to the HamBabble article when it was first published in October 2000. Several correspondents suggested further items for the list. These include: dBs (dollar bills) – term used by amateurs hypersensitive about breaching regulations by discussing matters of pecuniary interest, or involving money; (going) horizontally polarised - going to bed; and OM (Old Man) – amateur version of the formal sir, or the less formal

mate. Then there's the *throat clearers* or *over openers* such as 'Fine business on all that Tony', 'OK there Keith', 'All noted Lee', et cetera.

## Notes

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