

Help support
World Wide Words

[Click for details](#)

World Wide Words

Michael Quinion writes about international English from a British viewpoint

[HOME PAGE](#)

[SEND PAGE TO A
FRIEND](#)

YOU ARE IN THE
ARTICLES SECTION

[SECTION INDEX](#)

[PREVIOUS PAGE](#)

[NEXT PAGE](#)

OTHER SECTIONS

[QUESTIONS & ANSWERS](#)

[REVIEWS](#)

[TOPICAL WORDS](#)

[TURNS OF PHRASE](#)

[WEIRD WORDS](#)

FINDING THINGS

[INDEX \(A-F\)](#)

[INDEX \(G-O\)](#)

[INDEX \(P-Z\)](#)

[INDEX \(COMPLETE\)](#)

[SEARCH THE SITE](#)

[SURPRISE ME!](#)

WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

[SUBSCRIBE NOW!](#)

[GIFT SUBSCRIPTIONS](#)

[SUBSCRIBE VIA RSS](#)

SUPPORT PAGES

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

[CONTACT THE AUTHOR](#)

[OTHER WORDS SITES](#)

[PRONUNCIATION GUIDE](#)

BEAM ME UP, SCOTTY!

The linguistic legacy of Star Trek

Star Trek has been a global phenomenon for many years. Its first series back in the sixties may have been judged a failure by the network bosses, its low budgets, poor production values and bad acting may make it risible now, but its accumulated linguistic influence has been substantial. So has its sequel *The Next Generation*, which greatly enlarged and extended the concept. The more recent extensions, *Deep Space Nine* and *Voyager*, have not had the same impact on the language.

Its invented terminology—*dilithium crystals*, *transporters*, *cloaking devices*, *replicators*, *warp drives*, *mind meld*—has become familiar (even if the physics is more than a little wonky). The catchphrases from the original series—“It’s life, Jim, but not as we know it”, “I’m a doctor, not a ...”, and “Beam me up, Scotty”—are familiar to many unborn when it was first transmitted (even if, in the case of the last of these, it was never actually said: compare Humphrey Bogart’s “Play it again, Sam” in *Casablanca*). Even the split infinitive in the title sequence that offended many purists—“to boldly go where no man has gone before”—has had its sharp edges of offence rubbed off by long familiarity; perhaps even by the growing consciousness that there’s really no such thing as a split infinitive in English and that altering the word order would destroy the emphasis. The producers changed it for *The Next Generation* and I was fascinated and delighted to discover that they’d gone PC but hadn’t altered the grammar, making it “to boldly go where no one has gone before”.

So when a Californian inventor recently patented a device that uses a laser beam to ionise the air so an electric current can be carried along it to stun or kill someone, journalists had no need to flounder for a suitable name. Just call it a *phaser* and everybody will know exactly what you mean. Actually, the similarities are so great as to be almost uncanny and the inventor will have a hard job making any other name for his device stick. A major difference at this prototype stage is that the fictional device is hand-held, whilst the real one takes up a space “the size of a kitchen table” according to reports (it seems that “kitchen table” has now become a standard unit of measurement). I presume that the real device doesn’t cause its victims to vanish most elegantly in a cloud of violet smoke. The term *phaser* was created as a blend of *phase* and *laser*. The late Gene Roddenberry, the series’ originator and executive producer, said in 1968: “we realized that lasers might very well become commonplace by the time the show got on the air. We decided to say *phaser* instead. The reason we picked *phaser* is the *phasing* principle in physics in which power can be increased. It was logical, and it sounded good, so we used it”.

Another military application under development seeks to make warships invisible to radar and, you’re right, it’s been dubbed a *cloaking device*. And when some recent scientific speculation suggested it might be possible to travel faster than light, the term *warp drive* was ready to hand for the headlines. (Actually, *warp* in this sense is older than *Star Trek*; it and the fuller term *space warp* had been in use since the 1930s as convenient hand-waving terms, supposedly based on some distortion of the shape of space, for ways of defeating the light-speed barrier. But so far

as I can make out, *warp drive* was invented for the programme.)

Other terms have come out of the huge fan base which the series has inspired, in which individual fans are called *Trekkers* or *Trekkies* (a pejorative term that some even apply to themselves, in the rueful way of oppressed minorities). A sub-set of these fans, mostly female I gather, write a kind of romantic pornography called *K/S* (short for Kirk and Spock), on the assumption that they must have a homosexual relationship going. More generally in SF fandom such stories of male-male pairings among the characters of serials (less commonly female-female) are known as *slash fiction*, and now refer not only to characters in the original *Star Trek* series but also to its later incarnations as well as other series like *Babylon Five* and *The X-Files*.

And, in a linguistic development which could not have been imagined when the series started, the Klingon language has been invented (there are even Klingon fonts available online to write it in). The authoritative source is Marc Okrand's *Klingon Dictionary*, which includes not only invaluable warriorlike words such as "jegh" (surrender), but also phrases such as "tachDaq magham" (we will meet in the cocktail lounge) and "Du'HchoHmoH mlv vam" (this helmet suits you). The possibility of Klingon slash fiction fills me with mild apprehension.

World Wide Words is copyright © Michael Quinion, 1996–2004.
All rights reserved. [Contact the author](#) for reproduction requests.
[Comments and feedback](#) are always welcome.
Page created 6 August 1996; last updated 5 November 2003.