

PARTNER'S PERSPECTIVE

» A View from the Right Seat



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What Pilots Say and What Passengers Hear

Why aviation language sounds perfectly normal to pilots and mildly terrifying or humorous to everyone else

by Laurie Einstein Koszuta

On a Sunday morning several years ago, while taxiing out of Miami Executive Airport (KTMB), I heard the ground controller say, "Proceed to runway to heaven left." Not having had my morning coffee yet, I found it odd but stayed quiet. Later, while we were in the air heading home, the controller instructed, "Proceed direct to heaven, then destination."



What?

At that point, I was still learning the ins and outs of air traffic control (ATC) communications, but I started to wonder whether the controller worked for the FAA or the local church. John, my pilot husband, quickly clarified: the runway was actually '27 Left,' and "*Proceed to heaven, then destination*" referred to a waypoint in our flight plan, with 'destination' being our home airport. I felt a wave of relief and a bit of embarrassment. I was also grateful that pilots are required to repeat back ATC instructions, since what ATC says and what passengers hear can be very different things.

When you're not used to aviation shorthand, it's easy for your mind to fill in the blanks with words that weren't actually said. Linguists call these misunderstandings *mondegreens*. Song lyrics are a classic example. Take Carly Simon's line, "*Life*

is eternal," which I somehow heard as "Life is a turtle." I still haven't lived that one down.

Different accents and rapid-fire speech from controllers, along with scratchy radios, are all recipes for misunderstandings.

Not Quite Getting It

Another time, as we were taxiing to the runway, ATC told John to "*line up and wait*." But I was sure I heard, "light up and wait." My first thought was that it was an odd request since John doesn't smoke. But of course that made no sense. Then I wondered if he was supposed to turn on all the lights so the tower could see us, but that was a ridiculous notion, too. I knew I was supposed to stay quiet, so I didn't ask. When no lights came on, I just sat there, replaying the phrase in my mind and wondering what I'd missed.



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Next, ATC said, *“Hold short of Runway 18.”* But I thought I heard, *“Hold your shorts on Runway 18.”*

That felt like excellent advice, because at that point, I was hanging on to mine.

As I flew more, I thought I was starting to get the hang of the language. Then things fell apart again.

“Cleared for the visual approach” became *“Cleared for an unusual approach.”*

“Proceed on course” turned into *“Proceed, of course.”*

“Cleared for the option” morphed into *“Cleared for adoption.”*

“Expect vectors” somehow became *“Expect lectures.”*

You can just imagine the conversations John and I had in the cockpit based on those things I heard.

Radio Calls Aren’t the Only Problem

At this point, one might reasonably assume that I need hearing aids or perhaps that I should stop listening to ATC altogether.

But radio calls weren’t my only source of bewilderment.

A few years ago, we were flying the approach into Fort Lauderdale International (KFLI). I was working on my computer when John interrupted me and said, *“Put everything away. Buckle up, we’re going down.”* That verbiage was probably not his best choice of words at that early stage of my flying career as a right-seater.

Now that I have almost 1,000 hours sitting in the right seat, I know he meant we were starting a normal descent and wanted me to put things away and tighten my seat belt. If I hadn’t flown with him before, I might have thought we were in trouble or even worse that I should reach for CAPS.

Another time, he said, *“heads up”* in a totally quick but serious tone. I looked at him, confused. It turns out he wasn’t talking about my posture; he just wanted me to help watch for other planes.

There’s more. John once told me he was *“turning me off.”* I was a little annoyed because I thought he had had enough of listening to our conversation. Wives think that. But in reality, he was adjusting the radio so I wouldn’t have to listen to ATC while I worked.

Words With Different Meanings

Pilots use aviation phrases so often that they forget how it sounds to passengers. To pilots, words like *climb*, *descend*, *drop* and *sink* describe motion, not danger. But to passengers, those words can sound like something happening to the plane instead of something they are doing on purpose.

Early in our time owning a Cirrus, we were flying to Indianapolis when John said, “*Hold on.*” His voice sounded somber yet calm, as if he were handling something important. I immediately reached for the passenger handhold by the door, white-knuckled it and braced for bad news.

A moment later, he looked over, saw me awkwardly gripping the handle and asked, “What are you doing?”

“I’m holding on,” I said with a hint of fear in my voice. “You told me to.”

He burst out laughing. “No,” he said. “I was listening to an instruction from ATC to change frequencies and couldn’t talk at that moment.”

Alarming Words

Using short, precise phrases cuts down on precious radio time, since ATC may be communicating with 10 to 20 airplanes at once. Unfortunately, this shorthand language between pilots and ATC often leads to mystery, confusion and occasionally, distress for the unfamiliar passenger.

Aviation has a way of making routine maneuvers sound alarming. Pilots don’t turn; they bank. They don’t slow down; they pull power. While looking for other traffic, some may say “negative contact”

or “no joy.” Phrases have specific meanings for a controller. Some words are positive, such as “roger,” “wilco” or “affirm,” whereas a pilot may say “unable” if they cannot execute an ATC instruction for any reason.

When a pilot says, “There’ll be a little chop ahead,” they mean light turbulence. But for non-pilots, “chop” is one of those words that may make sense to a pilot but not to anyone trying to relax in the passenger seat.

On another early flight with a different Cirrus pilot, I heard, “*I see smoke.*” I looked all around, trying to determine what he was talking about. Thankfully, it wasn’t about smoke in the cockpit, but rather thick haze from heavy smoke on the ground. For a pilot that’s information. For a passenger, it’s like a plot twist.

Autopilot and Flaps

The same thing happens with technique talk about autopilot and flaps.

On one of our first flights, I heard John say he was going to “*hand-fly*” the plane. My mind wandered, and I pictured him flapping his arms to keep us in the air. Really, he just meant he was turning off the autopilot and flying manually. It’s also hard to hear a pilot mention turning on the autopilot without thinking of Otto, the inflatable co-pilot from the movie “Airplane”, at least for those of us familiar with that kind of humor.

When a pilot says “lowering flaps” or “full flaps” it’s just a small change they hardly notice. But all I can picture is a bird flapping its wings.

There are plenty of other funny examples we’ve all encountered. The flying stays the same, but the experience changes. Sometimes, all it takes is a few words. ⊕



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