

TLAs for JTO¹s

Or “*The Joy of Jargon*” (part two of an occasional series)

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It has often been remarked by those around me in the railway business that it is a wonder anyone ever understands any significant part of what is said. The reason for the comment is the bewildering proliferation of acronyms and jargon. Is there any other field of endeavour where one can say a complete sentence in acronyms? This dubious accolade goes to the permanent way, whose “RRWD MHT CWR, HRO²” is a clear winner. I can’t hope to explain them all (just buy my book, they are all in there) in one short article, but perhaps I can highlight the pitfalls and provide some information along the way.

But first, how did we get to this situation? Well, acronyms, abbreviations and portmanteau words speed up communication dramatically and mean the speaker or writer needs to say or write less to convey their meaning. In fact, I’ve just done it myself in the title, so I’d better explain!

An acronym is group of letters each representing a word in a phrase; so Light Amplification by the Stimulated Emission of Radiation becomes LASER. This example, together with others such as RADAR, NIMBY and TRUST, are special cases, as they have become words in their own right, often losing the capitalisation in the process. Ironically, there is no word to describe acronyms that have become independent words in this way.

Sources disagree over the first use of an acronym, some giving the astonishingly accurate 788BC in Phoenicia (by one Hanno in Baalbeck, I wonder how they know that? Why not go the whole hog, at 4:30 one Tuesday afternoon!), but all agree that the form was common by the first century AD as early christian code word; *fish* in Greek is ΙΧΘΥΣ (*ichthus*), which is said to stand for Ιησους Χριστος Θεου Υιος Σωτηρ (*Iesous CHristos THEou Uios Soter*: Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior).

The first reference to the word *acronym* in a dictionary is in 1943, despite widespread use of acronyms well before this: HMS in ship names, for instance. The word *acronym* comes from Greek: ακρον, (*akron*) "limb" + ονομα, (*onoma*) "name". Recent authorities have suggested that a new portmanteau word *anacronym* (anachronism + acronym) is needed, to describe an acronym whose original expansion is unknown to either party (like BRUNEL³).

Modern usage does not include full stops between letters, but previously they were used to indicate that the letters should each be pronounced individually. When expanding acronyms, proper names should be capitalised (like NR, Network Rail) but not others (like MENTOR, mobile electrical network tester and observation recorder.)

One could wander for hours through the wonderful world of acronyms, observing the common TLA (Three Letter Acronym, which itself a TLA) the lesser spotted leaky acronym (where one of the words has permanently escaped, as in PIN Number; this expands as Personal Identification Number Number) or the relatively rare VETLA (Very Extended Three Letter Acronym, like EMGTPA; Equivalent Million Gross Tonnes Per Annum). The record holder is apparently a Russian 56 letter blockbuster, but one wonders quite what the point is.

The railway, bless it, has AB, ABB, ABC, ABCB, ABCL, ABP, ABS, ABX, ACCA, ACE, ACI, ACIO, ACM, ACOP, ACSC, ACTO, ADD, AEA, AF, AFC, AFD, AFI, AGC, AHB, AHBC, AHBLC, AIP, AIR, AIRPS, AL, ALARP, ALC, ALRMS, ALRV, AM&EE, AMP, AMS, AMULET, AOCL, AOCR, AOR, APC, APM, APP, APT, APTIS, APWSS, AQL, AR, ARC, AREA, ARI, ARISE, ARL, ARPS, ARRC, ARS, ARTP, AS&TE, ASB, ASBPC, ASC, ASLEF, ASR, ASRC, ASTR, AT, ATA, ATAS, ATB, ATC, ATD, ATG, ATLAS, ATMF, ATO, ATOC, ATOMIC, ATP, ATR, ATS, ATT, ATTA, ATWS, AVB, AVC, AVCS, AVI, AVL, AVM, AWAC, AWB, AWG, AWI, AWS and AZ. That's 97 in just one letter of the alphabet, counting only UK railway specific ones and none of the financial ones! And, yes, some of them have more than one meaning.

Is this kind of thing really necessary? Well; yes. If the intention is to speed the exchange of ideas and information whilst reducing ambiguity, then all well and good. "continuous welded rail" is a bit of a mouthful, so CWR is a reasonable shortening. Provided everyone understands what the acronym represents, and it only represents one thing in any context, then the world is a better place.

Then again, no. How about ABS; which has four possible and largely unrelated expansions. Does it actually help matters? I think not. The meanings are Anti-lock Brake System, Absolute Block System, Automatic Ballast Sampling and As-Built Sketch; so be careful with the context, Eugene.

So, they have their place as useful shortcuts, but they can also cause problems. But what of the acronym retentive smug eejit⁴? You have at some point met one of these, a person who is unable to speak a sentence without using several acronyms, at least one of which you don't recognise. An example of this was "Don't forget about CCF", which stumped a dozen of us (combined railway experience a little over 200 years). Just expanding it once would have helped. One wonders if this is a power thing, people trying to prove their superiority by confusing everyone else? Anyway, CCF turns out to be "control centre of the future", which suddenly made sense (in context). A very good habit to get into is to expand the acronym fully the first time you use it in a speech, meeting or report. That way everyone knows where they stand.

A portmanteau word is one made by trimming two others and sticking them together. For example, contenary is made by combining contact and catenary, which describes it perfectly. An abbreviation is a shortening of words, like Per Way or Pway (but not PW, that's an acronym.)

As I wrote earlier, no wonder people are initially confused. But the railway has another trick up its sleeve; stealing normal words and giving them new meanings, sometimes many new meanings. You can probably point to an ankle, belly, foot, heel, knee⁵, knuckle, leg, nose and toe, but what about "set"? Any guesses for the number of railway specific meanings this humble little three letter word has? Time for the regular quiz... answers overleaf.

Answers:

1. The bend in a stock rail at the switch toe (a stock rail set)
2. An assembly of two stock rails and two switch rails (a set of switches)
3. To move a switch to one position or the other (to set the points)
4. The position of a switch (the set of the points)
5. A group of rail vehicles normally coupled together (a set of coaches, as in four car set)
6. To instruct a signalling system to make a route for a train (to set a route)
(There is another archaic one, extra bonus points available...)

Difficult as it may seem, there are also total opposites. Take a “left hand curve”. You’re a permanent way engineer, so you interpret this by standing with your back to lowest mileage, the railway curving away to the left in front of you. Sorted? No. To the overhead line equipment engineer, it is the opposite. They look at which rail is highest on the curve, so a left hand curve has its left hand rail highest when viewed looking towards high mileage. This means it normally curves to the right ...⁶

Try asking a signalling engineer what “like-for-like” means. He will say something like “replacing something with another largely identical item that performs an identical function and doesn’t need any design work”. Ask the permanent way engineer and you’ll get a range of answers, including “replace with new but identical materials”, “completely replace with new materials but in exactly the same place” and “replace it with something that achieves the same layout at the same sort of speeds but is a different size and totally different materials”. Now imagine trying to agree the scope of works for a “like-for-like junction renewal”; a job for your interdisciplinary design coordination champion if ever there was one!

The internal permanent way example is twist, which can be a good thing (in a twist rail) or a very bad thing (in a twist fault).

So now you’ve got the hang of the acronyms, the abbreviations and unique meanings? There’s more: the nicknames and local names! Impact wrenches are universally Bances (like vacuum cleaners are Hoovers) but an impact wrench can also be a bedstead, which is also a hurdy-gurdy, which is also a Jacker Packer, which is also a wacka packa, which is also a Wacker Plate. Permaquip, Bruff, Bardic and Plasser are other examples of company names that have also come to be the common name of something else (a type of scissor lift trolley, a type of road rail truck, a handlamp and four point lining respectively). However, not all scissor lift trolleys, road rail trucks, handlamps or lining systems are made by these companies, so the confusion just gets worse.

A Morpeth board? Named after the second speed-related derailment on the sharp curve at Morpeth, this is a lineside sign warning of a speed reduction ahead. Board is a term leftover from when signals were literally boards (operated by policemen, hence Bobby as a nickname for signallers), and now used to describe all lineside signs conveying an instruction. Signalling is littered with these: Hixon mods., Lime Street controls and Welwyn control are all named after accidents at these locations (though Lime Street never got Lime Street controls.)

The railway has a fair few “lost in the mists of time” examples, like “permanent way” itself. The name permanent way comes from the use of a temporary railway (or way)

during construction of the railway, the final track (the posh one, with all the right sleepers, clean rails, ballast and stuff) being laid last to make sure it stayed clean and tidy. “Why is it called permanent way” being the most asked question by new starters in our office.

Finally, spare a thought for the poor souls who thought that “fixed automatic track circuit operated warning system” would be a good name for a device that gave staff warning of approaching trains, particularly when it is ‘acronised’. It’s memorable, but I think “train operated warning system” is little catchier, don’t you?.

Footnotes:

¹ Junior technical officer, for anyone younger than 40.

² Re-Rail Weld and Destress Mill Heat Treated Continuous Welded Rail, High Rail Only.

³ I have no idea at all. It was the name of a Band III radiotelephone; if BR is British Rail, what’s the rest? Answers to iain@iainellis.com please.

⁴ You work it out (to yourself, please).

⁵ Alright, I cheated. Knees are the top corners of a gantry structure, particularly in overhead line terms.

⁶ When I first wrote that paragraph, it came out as “Difficult as it may seem, there are also total opposites. Take LHC. You’re a PWE, so you interpret this by standing with your back to London, the rly. curving away to the left in front of you. Sorted? No. To the OLE, it is the opposite. They look at which rail is highest on the curve, so a LHC has its LHR highest when viewed looking towards country. This means it normally curves to the right ...” Ah, the joy of jargon!