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# Ideas

THE WORD

## Totes presh

Why we love and loathe clipped words

By Erin McKean | OCTOBER 15, 2011



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Are you totes OK with clipped words such as *totes*? Does *totes* sound too *cazh*, or even *inappropes*, or do you think it's just *adorbs* when people shorten these words?

*Totes* (short for *totally*) and *cazh* (short for *casual*) are just two of the more recent abbreviated (or clipped) words in English. Many words we use every day are clippings: *gas* from *gasoline*; *chimp* instead of *chimpanzee*; *deli*, not *delicatessen*. In fact, it would be hard to get through a day without clipped words. You'd have to give up *carbs* and *tech*, seeing the *fam* (or at least your *sibs*); you couldn't *prep* for a *bio*

or *chem* (or, back in the day, a *home ec*) exam. You couldn't undergo *chemo*, join a *fan* club (from *fanatic*), play your (*violin*)*cello* or *piano* (*forte*), or plug your *Strat* into an *amp*. No matter how good your *intel* or how extensive your *recon*, you couldn't be sure your *info* was *legit*, which could affect your *cred* and your *rep*. On the upside, of course, you couldn't catch the *flu*.

Familiarity breeds acceptance: Today you'd have a hard time finding someone who sniffs at *taxi* and prefers to hail a *taximeter-cabriolet*. But some certainly find *totes* cutesy and annoying. Why do we love to clip words, and why do newly clipped words nevertheless face such scorn?

English speakers have been cutting words off at the syllabic knees since at least the 16th century, with *gent* (from *gentleman*) and *coz* (for *cousin*) being two of the earliest words to get the clipping treatment. Some words get a little taken off the back--*lab* loses -- *oratory*; *rep* ditches --*etition*--and some lose their fronts: *alli* comes off *gator*; *earth* detaches from *quake*. Occasionally, words get shortened at both ends at once, as with *in-flu-enza*. It makes sense: As things and their associated words become familiar, we treat them familiarly: *ad* instead of *advertisement*, *cell* instead of *cellular phone*. We're often tempted to blame the young for clippings, but they crop up wherever people share a natural communicative shorthand: in professional groups, say. Lexicographers, for instance, talk of *prons* (pronunciations) and *etys* (etymologies).

Even Latin words and phrases used in English haven't been immune to shortening, although some may find it *infra dig* (short for *infra*

*dignitatem*, “beneath one’s dignity”), better left to the *mob* (from *mobile vulgus*, “fickle crowd”). As Joseph Addison, the English essayist, wrote resignedly in 1711, “It is perhaps this Humour of speaking no more than we needs must, which has so miserably curtailed some of our Words, that in familiar Writings and Conversations they often lose all but their first Syllables, as in *mob. rep. pos. incog.*, and the like; and as all ridiculous Words make their first Entry into a Language by familiar Phrases, I dare not answer for these that they will not in time be looked upon as a part of our Tongue.” Jonathan Swift was less conciliatory, writing a year earlier, “I have done my utmost for some years past, to stop the progress of *Mob*...but have been plainly born down by Numbers, and betrayed by those who promised to assist me.”

But *totes* and *cazh* and *adorbs* are not shortened words for things, with their edges worn down by familiarity; they’re old qualitative words that have gotten a makeover, like a punky miniskirt cut out of an old school uniform. *Sup* is a newer, shinier version of *super*; *gorge* and *brill* are more emphatic than *gorgeous* and *brilliant*. Something *dece* is better than just *decent*; you *deffo* get more attention with *deffo* than *definitely*; using *ledge* and *presh* (for *legendary* and *precious*) reenergizes two older adjectives. These words make their speakers sound modern--until they become widespread enough to lose their edge.

Not every clipping is a success--despite *'za* (*pizza*) making it into the official US Scrabble wordlist back in 2006, it’s rarely heard away from the game board. Some clippings are destined to be linguistic fads with no more lasting power than pet rocks or slap bracelets. Some will get

shortened, and then shortened again: The eye-rolling *whatever* (in the sense of “have it your own way” or “I don’t care”) dates to at least 1973, but it was clipped first to *whatev* or *whatevs*, and then even further to *wev* or *evs*, growing more dismissive with each trim.

This illustrates perhaps the main advantage of the clipped words: succinctness. It’s *obvs* easier to point out the glaringly obvious without those extra letters, and if you urgently need the *deets* about something, why not skip dragging unnecessary *-tails* behind you? And using *devo* for *devastated*, say, gives you another kind of efficiency as well: You get extra bang out of (fewer) familiar syllables. By balancing slanginess--the clipping--with the underlying familiarity of the source word, you get bonus points for unconventionality, but you don’t really risk being misunderstood. Words like *totes* are more like remixes or cover versions of songs: enough novelty to grab listeners’ attention, but enough familiarity for comfort.

And because speakers of English, en masse, never miss a chance to do something creative with words, shortening familiar words is a high-reward, low-risk way to sound fresh without sacrificing mutual understanding. If in the process you drive your *boyf* (or *girlf*) crazy, you have my permission to tell them “whatevs.”

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