Folklore

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Published by University of North Texas Press

Untiedt, Kenneth L.
Folklore: In All of Us, In All We Do.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/5919.

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I knew when I joined the Lubbock Police Department in 1990 that I would be learning many new things. Although I already had a degree in criminal justice, I was aware that the education I had received in my college courses was only the tip of the iceberg. As with any new job, there would be rules and departmental procedures that were unique to where I was working, as well as other knowledge that was not formally taught but merely “picked up.” My academy training contained a lot of what I had already learned, as my class was composed of people from many different backgrounds, and only a few of us had any previous law enforcement training.

As I sat through four months of what I expected to be mainly review, I began to learn something that was completely new to me. I discovered that one of the most important skills in police work is not memorizing the laws and procedures, or becoming proficient in techniques for restraining prisoners; it is being able to speak the language used by real police officers. Cops have to be able to communicate well, and their jobs force them to become some of the best communicators I’ve ever seen. The language I learned was like no other I have ever heard. It was taught to me in the classroom, but also on the street, where it was passed on to me the same way it is to every rookie class: through the oral tradition. At the time, I just thought it was a necessary part of my training. Later, of course, I discovered that what I had been learning is considered a form of occupational lore.
This was the area of my education that was not only the most challenging, but at times also the most entertaining. You see, not only do police officers have to learn the art of communication, they also love to use it. Cops love to tell stories, and perhaps even more interesting, people love to hear the stories they have to tell. It’s hard to find a channel on television on any night that doesn’t have some kind of cop show on. From Hawaii Five-O to NYPD Blue or CSI, the American public has always wanted to know what goes on in the world of law enforcement. This is obviously a love-hate relationship; people want to see what the police do, and hear how they talk, and learn about the really grisly murders or deadly shoot-outs they’re involved in. But they don’t want the police to get too close to them, and they don’t want that television world to become a reality, to become something they can’t turn off. For the general public, watching cops on TV is exciting, it’s entertainment, it’s an escape.

However, this form of entertainment is not as easy to come by as you might think. The television shows you see are all presented in their decoded versions. You would not understand them in their original form because of the language police officers use. I found this language especially fascinating because of where I was working—West Texas. I heard words and phrases that were not only unique to law enforcement, but also to the region. It was often not what a person said, but how he or she said it that made it so unusual. Before I could learn the police terminology, I had to learn to speak Texan.

As my favorite bumper sticker says, “I wasn’t born in Texas, but I got here as fast as I could.” Although I was raised in a mid-western agricultural area similar to Lubbock, Texas, I had never heard many of the words and phrases that were being spoken all around me in my new home. When I was told that the Police Department entrance examination would be given “Tuesday week,” I thought most of the sentence had been left out. Was “Tuesday Week” anything like Memorial Day or Labor Day Weekend? And they told me to bring two forms of identification “whenever” I came for the test, not “when” I came for the test. One of
my new friends asked me to “carry him over” to his house when we were finished, and another asked if I could “run him across town.” I didn’t think I was physically fit enough to do either.

I felt as if I had fallen into a Jeff Foxworthy stand-up routine. At any moment I expected to find myself engaged in one of those conversations he talks about where everybody speaks in one-word sentences: “Yeaatyet?” “Naw.” “Yawunto?” “Awight.” I stumbled through, however, and learned enough to keep from looking like an idiot or insulting anyone. I learned that “sir” really was a title meant to show respect, not something that would automatically be regarded as sarcasm. I may never master it, but I did eventually achieve a fair level of competency in speaking Texan. Next, I had to attempt to understand the language of the police officer.

The language itself has a very practical purpose and origin. Law enforcement personnel use a lot of numbers and abbreviations, which are designed to identify things quickly and concisely. Each officer has a number, which designates a certain area or job that he or she is working. On duty, I was often 243. Off duty, I was always Papa 210. “Papa numbers” are randomly assigned to everyone according to
their rank. At the Lubbock Police Department, numbers under 300 were reserved for patrolmen, 300s were for corporals, 500s for sergeants, and so on. These Papa numbers only change when an officer is promoted. The on-duty numbers can change daily, depending on the area of town and shift you work. The “2” designates the second shift (from 3:00 P.M. to 11:00 P.M.) and the “43” designates a “beat,” or geographic area. If I had another officer helping on my beat, I would be 243 and he would be 243B, or 243Bravo.

The Bravo comes from the phonetic alphabet. Each letter has a word assigned to eliminate confusion over which letter was said. There is no way to confuse an “S” with an “F” when you say Sierra and Fox-trot. If you ever get stopped by a police officer and he asks you to say the alphabet—a task usually required when drivers are stopped for suspicion of driving while intoxicated—see what happens when you say: alpha, bravo, charlie, delta, echo, fox-trot, golf, hotel, india, juliet, kilo, lima, mike, november, oscar, papa, quebec, romeo, sierra, tango, uniform, victor, whiskey, xray, yankee, zulu. I can’t guarantee it will get you out of trouble, but it surely will impress the officer, whether he admits it or not.

The rest of the language is a mixture of the numbers, letters, and words used most frequently in that region or department. Much of it comes from the Ten Code, the abbreviated language used to communicate over two-way radios. 10-4 is one of the Ten Codes that most people are familiar with. It means “affirmative,” or “okay.” One of the most important ones to know is 10-7, which stands for dinner break. The one that officers like to use the most is 10-42, which is “ending tour of duty,” or more specifically, getting off for the night. Ten Codes vary from department to department, and occasionally they change within one system, due to revisions in policy.

Learning the Ten Code is easy enough to do, but that still would not make you literate in the police language. Most of the language is composed of words that have been invented to shorten what needs to be said on the radio in order to keep as much air space free as possible—in case of an emergency. If a citizen calls in a prowler, the citizen is referred to as the “reporting party,” or the “RP.” If something or someone cannot be located, the officer says
he or she was “unable to locate,” or “UTL.” These words are regularly mixed with the Ten Codes to make the radio conversations, or “radio traffic,” as brief as possible. If I told you that I had 10-17’d with the RP about the 10-14 whom I was UTL on, then found out that the RP was 10-96 anyway, so I went 10-8 no report after telling my backup to 10-22 and we were subsequently cleared for 10-7, it would seem very confusing. The translation is actually quite simple: I met with the person who called in and reported seeing a prowler (whom I did not locate), and after speaking with this reporting party I realized that he or she was mentally ill; I then told the officer sent to assist me to disregard the call and I finished it without making a report, and we were allowed to go eat dinner. The radio version would sound like this:

Dispatch: 10-4 243, 245 Clear?
245: 10-4, 10-8.
Dispatch: 243 and 245 clear 10-7.
243: Clear, 76.
245: Clear, 76.

Many of the terms that become part of the language are much more colorful than mere abbreviations or acronyms. While I worked there, the Lubbock Police Department was probably the only one in the free world that did not allow its officers to be “grass eaters,” a term applied to officers who accept a discount on food or coffee, usually from convenience stores and fastfood restaurants. Most officers, as well as most of the restaurants and convenience stores, believed that was a “jicky” rule. Jicky does not always mean “stupid,” by the way. Sometimes it means “anxious” or “suspicious,” as in, “That guy is acting pretty jicky, you’d better check him out.”

Immediately after an officer pays full price for a meal is the worst time to get a call on a “greenie,” or a dead person who has gone unnoticed for days . . . or weeks. Another unpleasant call is one involving a drunk driver, or a “D. Wobbly,” some of which are considered “drunker than Cooter Brown.” D. Wobblies are “chunked” into jail, as are most arrestees. “Pain compliance” is a term that means using minimal amounts of pain to get an offender
to do what the officer needs him to do, usually in dangerous situations. However, sometimes pain compliance is not enough, and the subject needs to be “thumped,” most often when he is guilty of “P.O.P.,” or “pissing off the police.” If an officer makes a mistake, he’ll have to “fade the heat,” but usually only when he gets carried away with thumping someone he’s chunking. Or, if he gets caught “chipping,” he might be the one who gets thumped, by his wife. I’m sure you can figure out what chipping is. Most people who have chips don’t want their spouses to know about them. By the way, I’m sure that not all of these phrases originated in law enforcement; some come from other southwestern folk groups, but to a Yankee like me, it was sometimes hard to tell the difference.

If an officer calls for “Help,” it is very different from merely requesting additional assistance. A call for Help usually gets response from almost every officer in the city, on duty or off. As you can imagine, it is not often heard on the radio. In the past, if an officer called for Help unnecessarily, or made any other blunder on the radio, a series of clicks could be heard immediately afterward. This was known as “popping,” and it was done by keying up a mic without saying anything. Unfortunately, newer radio systems have almost completely eliminated this tradition, as each individual radio has a number which is recorded each time the mic is activated and the offending “popper” can be located and disciplined.

If an officer did indeed call for Help, he might have had to draw his “SIG” from his “Sam Brown.” Sam Brown is a brand name of leather gun belts frequently used by police departments. My gun belt was made by a company called Don Hume, yet it was still called a Sam Brown. A SIG is a Sig Sauer, the brand of a popular semi-automatic weapon used by some police departments. However, if an officer carries a Smith and Wesson, then he pulls his “Smith” instead of his SIG. One thing is for sure: if you use your SIG, or your Smith or whatever, and you have to “pop a cap on someone,” there will be some serious heat to fade.

When talking to suspects on the street it is important for officers to understand some of their language as well. For instance, an officer may ask someone where he “lives,” then later ask where he
“stays.” The suspect can give two different—and correct—answers, depending on his background and which part of town he’s from. Where someone lives is usually their parents’ home, and where they stay is where you can find them when you need to. I also learned that if someone tells you he “barely” moved in, it could be anywhere from a week ago to a year ago, again depending on the neighborhood.

The citizens on the street are no different from the people in uniforms. I sometimes forget that it is the people who made the language. Everyone in my academy class had a nickname, from Mother Crusher and Critter to Kenman and Lord Helmet. Like most nicknames, they were usually sarcastic, and more than one was meant to reflect individual personalities or the way my classmates and instructors spoke or acted. You can be assured that neither Bullet nor Lightning was so named for their quick responses or chatty natures. Yet, these were the people who showed me the true uniqueness of the language they spoke, and it was their particular speech patterns that made the language as entertaining as it was interesting.
When Lightning was teaching firearms training and said, “You got to hunker down on this little hooter, or it’ll like to walk on you,” I had no idea what he meant. I’m not sure I do now. At times my friend Bullet spoke so slowly I thought we were trapped in a time warp and moving backwards. Radio traffic with him was never brief. He would arrive at an accident scene and say, “You might oughta go ahead and call me a wrecker, and it wouldn’t hurt for you to start E.M.S. on out here. This here feller looks like he’s fixin’ to bleed on out.”

These speech patterns have on more than one occasion found their way into written reports. Bullet’s reports read slowly. In the old days, a spoken faux pas would have probably been chuckled at and then forgotten shortly afterward. Centuries ago, the courts could get by without written documents. When bringing a criminal before a judge or jury, an officer could simply relate verbally what had happened, a verdict was reached, a punishment was chosen, and no written reports were necessary. As time passed, records were kept to monitor the court proceedings, but police officials still were able to rely on their memories of events to get their suspects prosecuted. Later, however, the courts began getting overloaded with cases, and the time between the arrest and actual prosecution grew from a matter of hours to a matter of days, weeks, or even months. Police officers needed to start making some kind of written report to help them remember what had happened when they finally got into the courtroom. These reports are permanent records, and this is where the oddities of the police language, especially those written by some good old boys from West Texas, can be humorous or even embarrassing.

In the old days the reports were simple. Although the report form encouraged the officers to make statements that were complete and detailed, the information actually written down could be very simple, as shown in this report from my department’s archives: “Ray Fowler: DRUNK.”1 Another report, written four
years later, by the same people in regards to the same suspect, is a little more detailed: “Found Fowler drunk again, brought him to the PD and locked him in jail. He did not ask to use the telephone.” One of my favorites, which was handwritten and is the epitome of conciseness, states, “Found this man in the bar ditch just as Drunk as any body I ever saw.” I would never have imagined writing a report that did not specify where I was, who was with me, how we got there and why, what the circumstances were for finding the arrestee, how I transported him or her wherever we went and at what date and time, as well as any other information I could think of to help me remember every little detail about each aspect of my total encounter with that person. I certainly would not have used some of the terms that I did when communicating with fellow officers.

The language and how it is used is constantly changing, as it must to evolve with time. Cops change with it. Although they can no longer “pop” each other on the radio, there is no shortage of MDT (basically email) messages being sent between the in-car computers. Even I conformed. When I would knock on someone’s door and they’d ask who it is, as silly as that was because they could see me through the peephole and they had just called 911, I found myself saying, “POlice,” instead of “police.” That’s the way real cops say it in West Texas.

I hope you’ve enjoyed this look into the secret language of law enforcement. After going 10-42 for good a few years ago, it’s sometimes fun to look back and remember some of the more interesting parts of my law enforcement career. I don’t miss it, but I do value the experiences and all that I learned.

**ENDNOTE**

1. All reports specifically referred to in this paper are official Lubbock Police Department crime reports, which are items of public record.
Vice-President Jack Garner. Photo used with permission from El Progreso Library, Uvalde, Texas