



PilotSpeak

A Beginner's Guide to the Aviation Lexicon

BY SUSAN PARSON

I've always loved languages. In addition to English, I have studied French, Spanish, Bengali, and several dialects of "Guy." But on the day of my first flight lesson, none of that linguistic experience helped me make sense of the static-filled gibberish flowing from the little Cessna's radio. It took a bit of time, effort, and practice, but eventually I got it. If you are a regular GA aircraft passenger who would like to know more about what's going on over the radio, here are a few tips that can help you decipher PilotSpeak.

The Ws

For safety reasons, the language of aviation is highly precise in both its "grammar" (structure) and its vocabulary. In fact, there is a dictionary of aviation terms and phrases called the Pilot/Controller Glossary to ensure that pilots and controllers assign the same meaning to the same words and phrases.

When a pilot makes a transmission, he or she follows a specific structure. The script calls for the pilot to say something like: "Phoenix Approach, Skyhawk 1357T, twenty miles west at five thousand five-hundred feet, landing Falcon Field." Now let's look at the individual elements:

- Whom you are calling: "Phoenix Approach" or "Richmond Tower"
- Who you are, using the aircraft's make, model, and tail number: "Skyhawk 1359 Tango"
- Where you are: "twenty miles west" at "5,500 feet" (read from the altimeter)
- What you want to do: "landing Falcon Field."

The controller will use a similar sequence to respond:

- Whom ATC is calling: "Skyhawk 1359 Tango"
- Who is calling you: "Phoenix Approach"
- Where ATC thinks you are (sometimes based on radar): "radar contact, twenty miles west "5,500 feet"
- What ATC wants you to do: "maintain present heading; descend and maintain 3,500 feet."

Depending on the situation, there are obviously a lot of variations in terms of words and phrases that pilots and controllers use. Still, the structural sequence is the same.

The Alphabet

To help avoid confusion with similar sounding consonants and numbers, in March 1956 the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) adopted a standard phonetic alphabet for aviation use:

Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo, Foxtrot, Golf, Hotel, India, Juliett, Kilo, Lima, Mike, November, Oscar, Papa, Quebec, Romeo, Sierra, Tango, Uniform, Victor, Whiskey, X-ray, Yankee, Zulu.

PilotSpeak numbers are pronounced mostly the same as they are in regular English, with just a few exceptions:

- The number three (3) becomes “tree.”
- The number five (5) becomes “fife.”
- The number nine (9) becomes “niner.”

Using the made-up tail number in the previous example, both the pilot and the controller will pronounce the airplane’s call sign as: “one-tree-fife-niner Tango.” You may or may not hear the call sign start with “November,” but if you look at the tail number of any U.S.-registered aircraft, you will see that it begins with “N” — “November.” Other countries use a different starting letter (or a combination of letters and numbers) to denote an aircraft on their registry.

Useful Words & Phrases

Now let’s decode some of the words and phrases you might hear:

ATIS (Automatic Terminal Information Service) is recorded information on current weather and airport information, such as runways in use. Each successive ATIS recording has an alpha-numeric designator to distinguish it from previous ones. For example, “ATIS information Foxtrot is current.”

Squawk: This word refers to the aircraft’s transponder code, which can be either a standard code (1200 for visual flight rules — VFR) or a discrete code assigned by ATC. Squawk can be a noun (“say assigned squawk”), and adjective (“squawk code is 2345”), or a verb (“squawk 5423”).

Mayday: Hopefully you will never have to use this one, but “Mayday” means emergency. In case you’re wondering, the word is a corruption of the French term for “help me” (m’aidez).

Who’s Roger?!

Last but not least ... ever wonder why aviators say “Roger?” A very plausible explanation arises from aviation’s early days, when the industry adopted customs, procedures, and terms from established industries like the telegraph business. Given the uncertain quality and reliability of Morse code telegraph transmissions, the receiver would transmit a single letter “R” — upon successful receipt of a message to signify that “I have received and understood your transmission.”

Early aviators needed a similar protocol. As it was not possible to transmit a Morse-coded “R,” they did the next best thing by transmitting the word “Roger,” which was at that time the spelling (“phonetic”) alphabet version of the letter “R.” Then, as now, it was simply an acknowledgement that “I have received and understood your last transmission.” So be grateful that aviation adopted this practice before the phonetic alphabet changed from “Roger” to “Romeo!” 

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