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WORDS IN THE AIR

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I am going to try and describe to you the use of standardised language in aviation and how important we consider it to be.

The business of international civil aviation is relatively young and really began in earnest after the second world war. In order to achieve standardisation throughout the world of civil aviation a body called the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) was set up by the United Nations in 1947. Today ICAO has over 140 member states; these states confer over all aspects of civil aviation, one of which is radiotelephony phraseology. At this moment the latest revision to radiotelephony phraseology is passing through the final stages at ICAO HQ Montreal for implementation around the world next year.

Initially there was very little contact between ground stations and aircraft and such contact as did take place was in morse code or wireless telegraphy (W/T) and high frequency (HF) radio which was not necessarily different. As the aviation business grew so did the need to communicate and eventually a system was developed in civil aviation using mainly very high frequency (VHF). During this build-up to the modern day it became obvious that there was a need for standardisation to eliminate confusion. One of the earliest problems was that the numbers 5 and 9 sound very similar over the radio telephone (RTF) and so they are pronounced fife and niner. The language used in civil aviation is primarily English, with French, Spanish and Russian as the other official languages. It would obviously be ideal if there were only one official language but national pride and tradition get in the way.

To expand a little on how these languages are used: each nation may speak its own language but must be able to communicate with international air traffic in English, or one of the three other official languages. Again I stress that it would be far simpler to have one language for aviation - this in itself might reduce the chance of confusion.

To give you an idea of how a pilot and controller speak and sound to each other I am going to play you a short tape recoding of Heathrow ground movement control (GMC).

You may or may not have understood all of what was happening on that tape because of the technical terms used, but the language was obvious and clear. We had examples of various nationalities communicating with each other in a standard manner. The necessity for everyone to describe or call a procedure or piece of equipment by the same name is equally important and failure to do so has contributed to some fatal accidents. Another problem is pronunciation of words and attention has been paid to this side of the language used. A frivolous example of mispronunciation accompanied by a heavy accent may help to describe this better. "A gentleman on holiday in England with some friends was asked whether there was anything he wanted to see and he replied yes, I would like to see a tat-ched-a-cottedger; this confused the gentleman's friends who had absolutely no idea what a tat-ched-a-cottedger was. The problem remained unresolved until one day when they went out for lunch to a pub in the country. The gentleman whilst admiring the countryside saw a tat-ched-a-cottedger and pointed it out to his friends who were amazed to see a thatched cottage. You may now appreciate the need for uniform pronunciation. ICAP produce documents for world-wide distribution which display the words, their meanings, pronunciation and examples of their use.

I will play you another short extract of a normal day at the London Air Traffic Control Centre followed by a talk down approach to a military airfield. The controller is one of approximately 30 radar controllers working at any one time and he is working the North East corner of the London Area from 2000 feet to 13000 feet within which one of the four Heathrow stacks is situated.

You may still be confused by some of the technical terms used but I think that these examples show the need for uniformity of language to avoid the possibility of ambiguities and so confusion. Confusion in aviation can be fatal.

To conclude, I would like to remind you that many different airlines operate in and out of London's Heathrow Airport. When you add to these airlines the ones which ply their trade out of London's other airports and those who overfly the UK en route to transatlantic or continental destinations, you can imagine that there is a considerable number of aircraft in the air at any one time. The absolute necessity for instructions to be understood and complied with requires the use of standard phraseology and clear pronunciation. Now that you have had a brief insight into the world of air traffic control and aviation I hope you can understand why our language is still developing and that new techniques have to be studied, and if necessary, words invented to suit all the people who are likely to use it.