

Put through the Wringer: Technologically Anachronistic Idioms



I don't know about you, but I closely follow US politics. After several recent agonizing weeks that culminated with the 81-year-old President not seeking a second term and with the history-making nomination of an African American/Asian American woman for the office, I turned to my wife and said I felt like I had been put through the wringer. ????? That sounded like something only a 70+-year-old would say.

I remember how, as a child, I was fascinated to watch my grandparent's servant, Maddie Snow, wringing out the laundry with that big hand-cranked wringer above a tub before she hung the clothes up to dry in the backyard of Mamaw and Grampa's house in Gatesville, Texas. (But I don't remember a clothes wringer in our own home—Mom always seemed to have a clothes dryer.) (And when I mentioned this phrase to our 30+-year-old son, he thought I was saying "put through the ringer".)

So this got me to thinking about phrases we still use that were based on technologies no longer extant, idioms whose origins many of us are not aware of. And this is what I came up with, a list presented in no particular order that by no means is meant to be definitive.¹

¹ Historical linguists, of course, have addressed this issue; cf., e.g., Douglas C. Youvan, "From Anachronisms to Neologisms: The Linguistic Evolution of Technology and Society," March 29, 2024 [preprint](#). And on this topic Albert Jack's delightful *Red Herrings And White Elephants: The Origins of the Phrases We Use Every Day* (London: John Blake Publishing Ltd., 2007) is a must-read, although it covers many Britishisms that we Americans do not use.

- ***Roll up the windows***

As many people have pointed out, car windows used to be cranked open or closed by turning a handle, but we still say “roll up the windows” or “roll down the windows” even though we now do so by flipping a switch. And there are many other similar phrases referring to turning a handle or knob that nowadays have been replaced with a switch:

- ***Turn on the lights*** Before my time, electric lights in homes used to be operated by round knobs one turned to complete a circuit. Now we just flip a switch or, for the more technologically advanced of us, pull out our phones and say “Lights on.”
 - ***Don’t touch that dial*** Newscasters still use this phrase to urge the audience not to change channels when they are going to a commercial break, even though it has been many years since any of us actually had to get up from the couch and walk over to the TV to turn a knob to switch channels. (The other day, I did hear a newscaster say, more appropriately, “Don’t touch that remote.”)
 - ***Tune in next week*** Ditto for the above.
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- ***Boob tube*** And speaking of televisions, some of us—people of my age!—still refer to them as “boob tubes” even though, again, it has been many years since we all replaced our old, bulky, cathode-ray tube machines with flat screens.



- ***Give me a ring***

For most of my life, a telephone was a sloped box with a rotary dial and a handset with rounded ends, the bottom one for speaking into and the top one for listening, with the handset connected to the box by a coiled wire and a cradle at the top of the box where the handset would rest when not in use. (I remember, again as a child visiting my grandparents in Texas, Mamaw and Grampa’s old telephone that you had to crank a handle to get started,

then you picked up a listening tube, jiggled the handle, and a switchboard operator would come on to ask you for the number you wanted to be connected to; I would just say into the speaking tube “I wanna talk to Grandpa Jim” and the operator would connect me to my other set of grandparents.) And then, back at home, came the telephone mounted on the wall, with the handset still connected to the box with that coiled wire. Then came the wireless phone one could use around the house, some with that newfangled touchpad “dialing”. And then there was cellular, with flip phones you could use walking around town, soon followed by those mobile phones everyone nowadays is staring at as they perambulate around.

And while none of our mobile phones have those little bells that used to clang on old telephones whenever there was an in-coming call, they are still programmed with ringing tones, many of which imitate the sound of old-fashioned telephones (and, on this, see “Snap a picture” below). And, although our phones don’t actually “ring” anymore, we still say *give me a ring*, and although our phones don’t have headsets resting on cradles, we still say *my phone was ringing off the hook* or *I’m going to hang up now*, and although our phones don’t have dials, we still say *I dialed that number*.

And then, there is the universal sign for “give me a call”: holding your hand up to your face with thumb and pinkie extended as if you were cradling a handset, even though most of the people who make this sign have never held or even seen a telephone handset in their life. (And few today understand me when I say “drop me a dime”, referring to how you used to have to put 10¢ in pay phones.)



[And speaking of anachronistic, or at least semi-anachronistic, hand gestures, there is the universal trend of pointing to your wrist when asking someone what time it is, even though most of us no longer wear wristwatches; the person answering your question will most likely pull out an iPhone to check what time it is.]

[I predict that in the near future, when people want to gesture for someone to give them a call or to ask them what time it is, they will hold their hands out with curved fingers and a bent thumb over an open palm as if they were holding a mobile phone.]

- ***Keep the cameras rolling***

The technology of cinema has changed a lot since the time of Thomas Edison. Although some artistic cinematographers still use 16mm film, nowadays almost all movies and TV shows are “filmed” digitally. Still, “film” directors will tell their digital camera operators to “keep the cameras rolling” when they want to keep “filming” a scene, and shout “cut” when the scene is over.²

[And, relatedly, we still say things like “I taped that show so I can watch it later” even though none of us still use magnetic tapes and we are merely programming our televisions to digitally record a show. Similarly, when we are watching a show and not paying attention to some part of it, we might turn to our partner and say “could you rewind that?” even though there is no winding or rewinding involved.]

- ***Be in the limelight*** A phrase that has its origin in the early 1800s when theater directors used a device that heated up calcium carbonate—lime—which produced a bright white light that would spotlight an actor.
- ***A trailer*** We watch a trailer to get an idea what a movie or show might have to offer, rarely realizing that trailers were originally segments of film that were spliced on to the end of a real film “film”.
- ***Soap operas*** Yes, daytime television still has banal situational dramas, but their commercial sponsors are not dominated by Proctor & Gamble or Ivory Soap any more.

² In her review of the BBC Studios series *Prehistoric Planet* (*New York Review of Books*, December 21, 2023, p. 41), Rebecca Giggs describes a curious photographic reverse anachronism, where the CGI-generated dinosaurs depicted in the series are shown as if they had been filmed by real, flawed, cameramen: “Large herds of prehistoric megafauna are viewed as though from a super-telephoto lens mounted on an on-shoulder rig. Stampeding dinosaurs, and those that soar swiftly through the air, sometimes momentarily outpace the tracking, running or dive-bombing beyond the frame of the shot—a lag that signals the limits of the reflexes of even the most adroit wildlife cinematographer and the apparent spontaneity of the animals’ movement. Paradoxically, what makes a world without people feel real is the anthropocentric perspective: those telltale signs of human presence, human error, and human creativity failing to fully erase themselves (or, in this case, deliberately imitated).

- ***Snap a picture***

And on the topic of photography, the other day as I was taking a picture with my iPhone, I noticed that it went “click” when I pushed the white button. [Okay, I know that mobile phones have been doing this for years, but I am often slow on the uptake!] And while I can understand the need for our mobile phones to make some kind of indication that a picture has just been taken, why use an anachronistic sound imitating the snapping of a camera shutter? (It has been many years since I had a camera with a shutter that snapped closed after the film had been exposed.)

- [And that **slow on the uptake** is another technological anachronism, as it appears to have referred to a faulty pipe leading up to a chimney from the smoke box of a steam boiler; while some of us still have water boilers in the basement, most don’t have coal-burning fire boxes needing smoke uptakes.]
- [**Running out of steam** Again, another semi-anachronism as steam technology is still in use, although few of us have steam engines or ride on steam locomotives that can be in danger of running out of boiled water.]
- And speaking of anachronistic sounds, we sometimes say that someone ***sounds like a broken record*** even if many of our listeners will never heard the sound of a needle skipping on a scratched vinyl record on the turntable. And, in movies, the sound of a needle coming to a screeching halt on a vinyl album is still used as a sound effect to signify a suddenly awkward or abrupt change in a scene.
- ***They recorded a new album*** is what we might say about a band that has released a new set of songs, even though the recording was digital and no vinyl album was involved. A semi-anachronism as many musical artists have returned to also releasing their songs on real vinyl records.

- ***Put pen to paper***

Okay, of course we still have ballpoint pens and we still make notes on paper, but few of us actually do any serious writing on pads of yellow notepaper as opposed to using a word-processing program on our computers. But a number of terms from old writing technologies are still in use:

- ***Pen pals*** Still exist, of course, but most of those who still mail real letters to each other are not writing them by hand, although some of the more traditionalist do.

- ***Upper case/lower case.*** Even our word-processors have upper and lower cases, although those of us who didn't learn how to set type in high-school shop class might not realize that in old fashioned printing the capital letters were kept in a case of boxes above a lower case holding the boxes of non-capitalized letters.
- ***Cut and paste*** Something I do all the time when I am writing, rarely bringing back memories of working on the school newspaper back in high school, when we would actually use scissors to cut some stories and use real paste to place them elsewhere in the copy.
- ***Carbon copy*** We still say things like "he's a carbon copy of the other one", even though the days of real carbon copies (and mimeographed copies) are long gone.
- ***Return key*** Every now and then, when I hit the return key on my computer keyboard I remember that big, silver, return lever at the top of my old typewriter that would reposition the carriage to be ready for me to start typing on a new line below the last one.
- ***Inbox*** We are all constantly checking our inboxes to see if we have any new mail, even if few of us ever worked at a job where there were real, physical, inboxes with letters or orders we had to address. (And we also had outboxes for those letters or orders we did complete—for my younger readers, read "sent mail".)

- ***That ship has sailed***

It is amazing how many of our technologically anachronistic idioms come from old nautical terminology. (Albert Jack's *Red Herrings and White Elephants* is a good source for many of these.) Yes, of course, we still have sailboats, but nowadays the sea-going vessels that carry cargo across the globe are powered by diesel engines, even though when they embark on a voyage we say that they have ***set sail***.

Some of the archaic nautical terminology we still use are easily understood, like ***above board*** or ***figurehead***. Other terms are more obscure:

- ***Sun over the yardarm*** Those of us who are drinkers will use this phrase to indicate that it is time to have our first alcoholic beverage, usually meaning the early evening. But back in the day, in northern latitudes, the sun would go over the yardarm of a sailing ship at around 11am, the time when officers would slip below decks for a forenoon "stand easy" drink. And it is easy to see why many sailors (and others) could get ***three sheets to the wind*** by starting drinking so early!

- ***A square meal*** Breakfasts and lunches on old sailing ships were paltry affairs, little more than bread and water. But the main food of the day was dinner, a hot meal that was served on square wooden plates the sailors brought with them, the square meal.
- ***Son of a gun***. Women were allow aboard on some old sailing ships and occasionally a pregnancy came to term while onboard, with the woman giving birth under the big sheet that covered the ship's main gun. If the paternity of the child was in question, the captain would declare that the child was a "son of a gun".
- ***It's in my wheelhouse*** It is unclear whether this idiom we might use when we feel particularly confident in our competency derives from the covering that housed the paddlewheel of a steamboat, or from the fore-cabin housing the wheel a captain would use to steer a steamboat, but it is a fair certainty that none of us using the phrase would ever have been on a steamboat crew. And few know that, in the late 1950s, the idiom was transferred to baseball, used to describe that part of the strike zone where a particular batter has the most power, as in "the pitcher threw the ball into the batter's wheelhouse and he knocked it out of the park."

- ***He's telegraphing it***

When someone, usually inadvertently, gives a signal about something they are about to do, like in martial arts when a player indicates to an opponent that they are about to deliver a karate kick, or like a recent MSNBC report "Trump seems like he is telegraphing that he knows he's going to lose," we use an idiom from the old days when Western Union telegraphs were the main technology for sending information over long distances.

- ***Wire me some money*** And while the Western Union company still exists, the banking information they may deliver is sent over fiber-optic cables, not over real wires.

- ***A flash in the pan***

Gun ownership is a real problem in the United States (one of the reasons I fled the country and moved to Europe). Still, few Americans—a handful of historical reenactors aside—will have ever have primed a flintlock musket with gunpowder.

- ***Quick on the draw*** A phrase we now use to describe someone who is particularly astute, not someone who would do well at the OK Corral.

- ***Barking up the wrong tree*** Few of us have ever been on a raccoon hunt (I did, back in my childhood summers in Texas), and thus will miss the reference in this idiom to a dog that mistakenly thought it had treed a raccoon.



In his 2024 article, "From Anachronisms to Neologisms: The Linguistic Evolution of Technology and Society," Douglas Youvan states:

Language is not only a medium of communication but also a living, evolving entity that mirrors the technological and social changes occurring within a society. As civilizations progress, the lexicon expands and transforms, accommodating new realities and discarding obsolete concepts. This dynamic interplay between language, technology, and society offers a rich field of study for linguists, historians, and cultural analysts alike. It reveals how words—through their presence, transformation, or obsolescence—can provide insights into the zeitgeist of different eras.

The evolution of language is deeply intertwined with technological innovations and shifts in social practices. From the invention of the wheel to the advent of the internet, each technological leap has brought with it new terms and phrases to describe emerging realities. Similarly, social changes—be it in governance, lifestyle, or culture—have necessitated the adoption of new linguistic constructs or the modification of existing ones. This continual process of linguistic adaptation highlights the resilience and flexibility of language as a system of human expression.

Youvan is by no means advocating for a strict Sapir-Whorf linguistic determinism, but he recognizes the interconnectedness between language and culture. And looking over my (admittedly incomplete) catalog of technological anachronisms, it is interesting to note that we tend to retain out-of-date idioms from technologies that have connected ourselves to others, from sailing ships, to printing presses and typewriters, telephones, televisions, and telegraphs, and the cinema.

- ***A tip of the hat*** And not all linguistic anachronisms have their origins in technology. Some come from social customs. We might say “a tip of the hat to you” without actually doffing anything as it was *de rigueur* for 19th gentlemen to do with their top hats.

And anachronisms need not be frozen in time; they can evolve into neologisms, like

- ***Dashboard*** Originally referring to a real board placed at the front of a horse-drawn carriage to prevent dung and mud from being kicked up into the vehicle; when automobiles replaced horse-drawn carriages the dashboard became the front panel in a car that presents important information like the speedometer, the odometer, the gas gauge, and warning lights. (And, now, a GPS map.) Then, as more and more data flooded into our computer screens, a dashboard is now a neologism for a graphical user interface presenting at-a-glance views of data relevant to a particular project.

And I can’t help myself from ending with one more example:

- ***A computer bug*** A neologism with its origins in a real-life insect. In 1947, engineers working on the Mark II Aiken Relay Calculator at Harvard University found a moth inside the machine that was causing an electrical fault and disrupting the system’s normal operation. I like to think of the software coders who sloppily allow bugs to infest our computers as “moths”!