



INDIETRO

# C'ERA UNA VOLTA IN AMERICA L'OK

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dell'Enciclopedia. Ci sono però alcune cose ancora da dire sull'etimologia di questa parola, che nei più importanti dizionari italiani è quasi sempre offerta con formule dubitative. La questione, in realtà, è chiara da almeno sessant'anni: la forma è stata studiata da Allan Walker Read, uno dei maggiori lessicografi americani del Novecento, in una serie di articoli pubblicati a partire dagli anni Quaranta (di particolare rilievo il gruppo di saggi del 1963-1964 sul quale mi baserò). Per gli americani il nome di questo studioso è così legato alla storia di *ok* che, quando morì, quasi centenario, «The New York Times» (18/10/2002) titolò: *Allen Read, the o.k. expert, is dead*.

Naturalmente, non c'è niente che non possa essere nuovamente discusso, ma Read allegò ai suoi contributi una tale mole di documenti che sostenere cose diverse dalle sue, oggi, non è così semplice.

Dunque, la vicenda comincia con una mania (a *craze*, come la definisce Read in un articolo intitolato *The First Stage in the History of O.K.*, in «American Speech», 38 1963, pp. 5-27), a Boston, sul «Boston Morning Post»: a partire dall'estate del 1838, molti sintagmi cominciano ad apparire puntati. Diversi articoli giornalistici si presentano così con un notevole numero di sigle non sempre facili da decifrare. La tendenza a ridurre alla sola iniziale i nomi propri era già diffusa nella lingua inglese, e in particolare in America, ma qui si andava ben oltre la questione degli antroponimi o dei marchionimi. Alle spalle del nuovo gusto per la riduzione potrebbe esserci l'uso orale di qualche selezionato circolo (secondo una testimonianza dell'epoca, l'origine di questa moda andrebbe ricercata nella Chicago degli anni 1835-1836).

Come sia, la parte documentabile è nei giornali bostoniani a partire dal 1838 e dava esiti come il seguente: «we understand James Elliot Brown [...] F.A.H. (fell at Hoboken, N.J.) [...] in a duel W.O.O.O.F.C. (with one of our first citizens)» (nel «Boston Morning Post», 12/6/1838, pp. 2-3. Trad.:

'apprendiamo che James Elliot Brown è morto a Hoboken in un duello con uno dei nostri primi cittadini'). Read è in grado di esibire decine di esempi analoghi. Per tutto il 1838, la sigla più frequente non è *ok* – che veramente appare affatto – ma O.F.M.: *our first man*, un modo di dire dell'epoca, spesso scherzoso, che forse potremmo tradurre con 'il migliore dei nostri'.

gli omofoni non omografi sono molto frequenti; per stare soltanto al caso che stiamo vedendo, si consideri che *right* 'giusto', *write* 'scrivere', *rite* 'rito' e il suffisso *-wright* hanno un'identica pronuncia; fatti come questi sono motivo di frequenti dubbi di *spelling*, talora anche fra gli scriventi colti, e possono fornire lo spunto per giochi di parole difficili da cogliere per chi ha in mente un sistema ortografico come quello italiano. All'inizio, l'autore di queste sigle era prevalentemente Charles Gordon Greene, il vulcanico e arguto fondatore del «Boston Morning Post». Il divertimento, ma anche lo stupore dei lettori per queste abbreviazioni, che a volte si spingevano oltre l'immaginabile, traspare da una lettera al giornale che Greene pubblicò; la lettera diceva: «Mr. Greene, se nel prossimo numero spiegherà il significato di g.t.d.h.d., molti O.F.M. le saranno obbligati». Greene rispose con un laconico e divertente: «È abbastanza chiaro: "Give The Devil His Due"»). Si andò avanti così per alcuni mesi, finché il 23 marzo 1839, un giovedì, nel «Boston Morning Post», a p. 2, apparve *ok* seguito dalla glossa esplicativa *all correct* (traggo una riproduzione dell'articolo dal libro divulgativo di Allan Metcalf, *Ok. The Improbable Story of America's Greatest Word*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 29):

and last amendment, the  
of order, and the rule laid  
each occasion was perfectly  
amendment to an amend-  
ment, but that, as this rule, if  
it, would cause confusion,  
universal custom that it  
than the amendment to  
the Speaker read the rule in  
187, 88, which was perfect-  
any blame was to be at-  
tention, it must be shared with  
the Choir, Mr. CHA-  
consideration of the vote of  
the minimum of three gal-  
one gallon. A long and  
to which the member from  
legislated for a wife and  
and some personalities at the  
Lancaster, who was called  
Springfield, and checked  
tion of the question was  
and nays ordered on the  
the words "one gallon."  
the motion to re-consider  
ative—Yeas, 228—Nays,  
the House then adjourned  
entertaining any motion to  
ity.  
gallons," was substituted  
being taken by yeas and  
207. The previous question  
not sustained, and Mr  
offered a very long amend-  
very inaudible tone. Mr  
ed the bill reported by the  
as he called Mr Bliss and  
de an animated speech in  
B, which he would have  
prohibition against the sale  
ner as ardent spirits are  
nan, spoke in reply to Mr  
New Bedford, followed on  
quence of the impotence  
he gave way to a motion  
time is near at hand when  
sex must once more buckle  
it to secure a member of  
p. 4. Cheered on by the  
they will come to the field  
hands: let energy,  
action, and a tri-

through the city, on their way to N. York. Nothing  
but the short notice prevented the Marine Artillery  
from turning out to do honor to the occasion. The  
report proved unfounded, however, and has led to the  
opinion here that the Post is not the organ of that  
illustrious body.

The above is from the Providence Journal, the edi-  
tor of which is a little too quick on the trigger, on  
this occasion. We said not a word about our depu-  
tation passing "through the city" of Providence.—  
We said our brethren were going to New York in the  
Richmond, and they did go, as per Post of Thursday.  
The "Chairman of the Committee on Charity Lec-  
ture Dells," is one of the deputation, and perhaps if  
he should return to Boston, via Providence, he or  
the Journal, and his train-band, would have the  
"contribution box," et ceteras, o. k.—all correct—and  
cause the corks to fly, like sparks, upward.

of forge-  
ries, amounting to several thousands of dollars, were  
detected yesterday at the banks in this town. The  
perpetrator, a young man of respectable connections,  
and who has hitherto sustained an irreproachable  
character, left here several days since, and was last  
seen in New York, on his way south.—N. Bedford  
Mercury.

**Hampden County.**—The Hampden Post of the 20th  
instant says—

"The town elections in this county so far as we  
have received returns, have resulted favorably to the  
democratic cause. Granville and Monson, two feder-  
al towns last autumn, have, we understand elected  
democratic town officers this spring by very decided  
majorities. This is highly encouraging. Let other  
towns follow the example. Palmer and Westfield  
maintain their strong democratic majorities."

**Tit for Tat.**—The Nashua Gazette—one of the best  
democratic papers we receive—contains the following  
clever squib:—

"The Telegraph says a person was bailed out of  
Amherst jail to vote the democratic ticket. Indeed!  
What was the "whig," who was put there for par-  
ticipation in the same affair bailed out for?"

**The Whigs** elected N. B. Borden, Moderator of  
their Town Meeting, at Fall River, on Monday last.  
This is the man who pretended to be a democrat as  
long as the democrats would send him to Congress to  
vote against them.

Mr Brownson's Discourse to-morrow morn-  
ing, at the Masonic Temple, we are told will be on  
**TRANSUBSTANTIATION.**

**On the First Page—Poetry**—The Oratorio of  
David—The Wisdom and Genius of Shakespeare—  
The Irish Charitable Society's Anniversary celebra-  
tion—Burning the President in effigy, &c.

The Secretary of the Com-  
the following message from  
To the Senate and House of

I transmit to the two Hou-  
ceived yesterday, from His  
of Maine, of the 19th inst.,  
Resolutions of the Legislat-  
priating the sum of \$10,000  
from Houlton to the Arco-  
a like appropriation on the pr  
E1

Council Chamber, 22d Ma-  
This Message was read in  
nittee on Public Lands.

The House then proceed-  
the License Bill, and on  
tern, the vote whereby the  
to strike out the word one,  
question then recurring on  
saying three, it was divided  
nay and the first part there-  
yeas 228, nays 216,  
question, the House adjourn-  
Afternoon.—Bill passed to  
construction of the Western  
Sundry papers from the S

The House proceeded to t  
resumed the consideration  
sale of spirituous liquors.  
question pending at the last  
the insertion of the word "th-  
proviso of the first section,  
second section was taken  
decided in the affirmative.  
Mr Hinckley, of Barnstable,  
the proviso of the first sect  
5th and 6th sections, and  
House adjourned.

Dr Bartlett opened his  
lative Committee, yesterday  
quent and forcible plea.  
again this morning at 8 o'clk  
Sprague are counsel for the  
Hallett for Dr Bartlett.

Our series of "Skete-  
which have been suspended  
room for the proceedings in  
the license law, will be resu-  
ituted till the close of the  
sired event should not be pos-  
4th of July.

**How now?**—Col. Thayer,  
to speak on the license bill, t  
afternoon, "and is n't that a

**Duel.**—The Nashville Whi-  
near Moscow, Fayette count-  
since, between Andrew Jack-  
vate secretary of Ex-President  
Robinson—both slightly wou

"Suffer little children to com-  
Augusta, Geo., on the 17th  
son, Mr Hiram Dill, aged 14

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apparso nei mesi precedenti. Iva Greene continuò a usarlo nei mesi successivi, creando i presupposti per la sua futura fortuna. La diffusione si completò nell'estate del 1839 quando la stessa mania della scrittura puntata (che ormai comprendeva stabilmente il nostro *ok*) cominciò a diffondersi a New York, a Washington, a Philadelphia e ben presto anche in luoghi molto distanti. Ovunque arrivasse, questa moda non passava inosservata: Read può mostrare diversi articoli, di tipo diremmo "metalinguistico", in cui i lettori o i giornalisti parlano della novità incuriositi, divertiti o stupiti e creano delle liste di sigle ricorrenti.

In teoria, il racconto terminerebbe qui. Ci si stancò presto: niente più OW (*all right*), niente KG (*no go*), niente GT (*gone to Texas*) e – nel giro di pochi anni – niente di niente. La ragione della sopravvivenza di OK è piuttosto curiosa ed è spiegata da Read in un altro articolo (*The Second Stage in the History of "O.K."*, in «*American Speech*», 38 1963, pp. 83-102). Nel 1840, gli organizzatori della campagna presidenziale di Martin Van Buren decisero di usare OK approfittando della mania ancora in corso; OK in questo caso era Old Kinderhook (Kinderhook era la città di nascita di Van Buren): *la vecchia Kinderhook è ok!* La strategia funzionò bene anche per l'alone di mistero che circondava la parola, che era stata tratta da un settore tutto sommato periferico della lingua e collocata da un giorno all'altro al centro del *main stream*: sui festoni, sui gadget e a caratteri cubitali sulle pagine dei giornali. Qualunque cosa significasse, comunicava ottimismo. Funzionava talmente bene che l'avversario di Van Buren, Harrison, senza neppure preoccuparsi di inventare un'espressione pretestuosa come *Old Kinderhook*, cominciò a usarla anche lui. Ecco un'immagine del 15 dicembre 1840, che prelevo sempre da Metcalf (a p. 49):



### Presidential Election.

COMPLETE.

	HARRISON.	VAN BUREN.
MAINE.....	10.....	
NEW HAMPSHIRE.....		7
VERMONT.....	7.....	
MASSACHUSETTS.....	14.....	
RHODE ISLAND.....	4.....	
CONNECTICUT.....	8.....	
NEW YORK.....	42.....	
NEW JERSEY.....	8.....	
PENNSYLVANIA.....	30.....	
DELAWARE.....	3.....	
MARYLAND.....	10.....	
VIRGINIA.....		23
NORTH CAROLINA.....	15.....	
SOUTH CAROLINA.....		11
GEORGIA.....	11.....	



## NEW JERSEY.

OFFICIAL.

	HARRISON.	VAN BUREN.
Atlantic	425	516
Bergen	977	1319
Burlington	3417	2403
Cape May	606	191
Cumberland	1407	1190
Essex	4676	2832
Gloucester	2368	1773
Hudson	732	501
Hunterdon	1830	2733
Mercer	2022	1491
Middlesex	2016	1683
Monmouth	2953	2830
Morris	2509	2150
Passaic	7362	502
Salem	1587	1302
Somerset	1721	1345
Sussex	1471	2932
Warren	1419	2466

33,351 31,631

Harrison's maj. 2,317

The exact vote of each candidate for Elector was

Condict	33,340	Depue	31,002
Lupton	33,350	Fairchild	31,004
Hill	33,356	Cassedy	31,001
Ryerson	33,252	Bigelow	31,002
Runk	33,250	Van Deusen	31,029
Wright	33,249	Sloan	31,002
Newbold	33,302	Hulme	30,578
Townsend	33,346	Stull	31,015

The difference between the two highest, Newbold and Fairchild, is 278.

Mr. Hulme, (L. F.) received 409 votes in Gloucester in a wrong name, which should be added to his vote.

Una parola spuntata dall'oscurità non poteva non suscitare fantasie sulla sua origine e sul suo significato. Un terzo articolo di Read (*The Folklore of "O.K."*, in «American Speech», 39 1964, pp. 5-25) passa in rassegna gli scioglimenti che in quello stesso 1840 e negli anni successivi vennero proposti per ok. Le ipotesi a volte erano avanzate autorevolmente, ma nella maggioranza dei casi si trattava di pseudo-etimologie popolari senza alcuna pretesa. Sarebbe impossibile mostrarle, ma dall'archivio di Google Libri riemerge un articolo del «Western Temperance Journal» del primo febbraio 1841 (p. 14) molto esplicativo; se ok si era diffuso come un gioco nel 1839, ora, negli anni





O. K. *Oil Korrekt*. Men are all correct as regards temperance when they set out in life. What a pity it is they do not.

O. K. *Always Kontinue* temperate. If they would join the temperance society, and resolve to touch not, taste not, and handle not the unclean thing, there would be no drunkards.—But instead of that they begin with

O. O. K. *Only One Kip* at a time, and that only now and then. They never design to be drunkards. After a while, these temperance drinkers find themselves nearly

O. K. *Oil Korred*. But as they have reached this state of the drunkard's O. K. *opprobrious kurere*,—by slow degrees they are often insensible of their condition, and unconscious of danger. They can't see themselves as others see them, and they are apt to have no friends kind enough or resolute enough to tell them that they are

O. K. *Already Kurred*—by the demon alcohol, and that they are ruining themselves, and not only destroying their

O. K. *Own Karakter*—but disgracing and distressing their families and

O. K. *Oil Konnected*—with them. Unless they reform speedily, and throw away

O. K. *Oil Kinds* of intoxicating drinks, they will soon be

O. K. *Oil Killed*—and a hard death they may expect. When they have got to drinking every day, they may count on living not over ten years. This is about the average length of time that men of confirmed drinking habits live after commencing the practice.

In the course of ten years as many drunkards die as there are drunkards living at the beginning of the ten years. There were 300,000 drunkards in the United States ten years ago. These are nearly

O. K. *Oil Killed* at this time. For every one of them who is yet living, one who became a drunkard within that time has died, so that fu'l 300,000 of the people of this country have died directly from strong drink in ten years. This is 30,000 a year!—When a man is run over on the rail-road, or crushed beneath the cars, the newspapers publish it as an

O. K. *Outful Kalamity*—But death from intemperance is much more awful than this. Drunkards and men of drinking habits are apt to die mad, cursing and swearing with their latest breath. They often have to be tied fast to keep them from killing their nearest relations. The death of the drunkard is horrible indeed. And yet there are 82 deaths from this cause every day in our "happy" country, or three every hour, on an average. But it won't do to say much about this, because a numerous and respectable body of men earn (or rather get) their living by this butchery. We wish every rum-seller would

O. K. *Open* an 'Kount on his books, charging himself with these 82 deaths per diem, and setting down opposite to the charge the amount he has received for his day's work, thus:

er, and share each one in the aggregate mass of responsibility devolving on those who have aided in the slaughter of 30,000 per annum of their fellow beings.

In addition to these entries, they might add another account of

*Orphans Koused*—by the rum trade.—Suppose one out of five of their victims is a father with three children. That would make forty-three orphans every day, or 18,000 a year. If I were a rum-seller I would

O. K. *Out with my Kasks*—as soon as possible, and try to get the smell of alcohol out of my house before I could rest my head on its pillow.

O. K. has several other meanings, which would take up too much room in the dictionary. For instance,

O. K. *Out of Cash*—which is apt to be the condition of the lovers of rum.

O. K. *Overion Koming*—when the sheriff or constable will sell the drunkard's furniture, or pay his debts, instead of going to neighbor Overreach, who has got the poor fellow's money in his drawer.

O. K. also means *Orkard Kondukt*, of which gentlemen are often guilty, when they have a glass or two on board. You often see doctors, and always the most respectable (!) men in society, behaving in a very silly manner, without being conscious of it—and yet they are perfectly sober—that is, they do not stagger. I have thought that if some of these great men could only see how simple is their behavior after a glass or two of wine, they would lock themselves up always after drinking, or else avoid the poison. A good many, however, instead of making fools of themselves, get

O. K. *Offully Krabbed*, and ready to quarrel with every body around them. I know a number of men who, if they drink only one or two glasses of wine, are as cross as cats. When I see these men filling their glasses, I behave pretty much as I should if their bodies were made of Dupont's best, and the alcohol were sold instead of liquid fire; that is, I

K. O. *Alcar Out*—as fast as possible.—Some of these gentry are particularly fond of

O. K. *Oil of Karrison*—or Albany Ale.

O. K.

A CLOSE REMARK.—A mere lad who attended a religious anniversary in one of our churches, remarked to one of his family, that Mr. ———, a very wealthy member of the church, gave a nod when the collection-box was presented to him, but sung as loud as any one present,—

"Shall we, whose souls are lighted  
With wisdom from on high—  
Shall we to men benighted,  
The lamp of life deny!"

*Intemperance and Suicide*—Mr. Wm. Myers, of Sheridan, N. Y., committed suicide a few days since, by hanging himself while intoxicated.

him.

"Get up! You were very near being run over!" cried the engineer.

"I won't do any such thing—that's just what I want—I insist upon being run over," replied the man.

"You fool! get out of the way or you'll be cut in two," continued the engineer.

"I'm not a fool—I'm not going to be fooled by my wife any more; cut me in two,—I want to be cut in two because I can't *tunle* myself. Mind your business and go ahead."

Saying this, the man (who had been drinking,) adjusted himself on the iron rail with his face downwards, and waited with real earnestness for the wheels to crush him. He was dragged away by force, and with some difficulty confined a few steps from the track until the train passed.—Baltimore visitor.

*A Society for the Propagation of Vice*.—The Sun of Thursday, states that there is a licentious society in existence in this city, composed of prodigal dry goods and other clerks, who make it their business to collect in a register the names of all unprotected females in the community, with a description of their personal attractions, and setting opposite their names, remarks upon their characters, circumstances, and the appropriate times to insult them. The Sun states that one of the crew has already tasted the sweets of Lync Law in a neighboring State, and intimates that unless an immediate dissolution of the society takes place, the members will be exposed to the rigors of the law, and the indignation of the public. Why not expose the men, beggars, contemptible, dastardly scoundrels at once! What mercy, what lenity should be shown to a set of wretches, who have deliberately planned the most black and atrocious crime, of which the human heart is capable,—the wholesale seduction of all the weak and unprotected females they can find out. Fancy for a moment, a society for the propagation of vice established in the heart of New York; and fancy, in that polluted and despicable society, a record kept of virtuous but unprotected females, whom the members could insult with impunity, and upon whom they could practice their hellish arts without fear of earthly consequences! Where will depravity end!

Since the first publication of this matter in the Sun, the editors have received several anonymous letters threatening them with personal assault if they persist in exposing or commenting upon this atrocious club.—*Editor.*

## POETRY.

### "HIGH CONNECTIONS."

By FRANCIS S. OSBORN.

"I grant his good and handsome, dear,  
This charming Julian Stanley;  
A genius and a hero too,  
And courteous as he's manly.  
I own his heart a generous one,  
And rich in warm affections,  
'None know him but to praise him,' love;  
But—has he high connections?"

"He has, the highest!" Jane replied,  
With smiles and blushes blended.  
"Ah! then all's right!"—her exulting cried,  
"Who are they!—how descended?"

"His kin are all the great and good!  
He's linked with them forever,  
By sympathy—the only tie  
That death will fail to sever,  
And higher still—his noble mind,  
His pure and true affections,  
Have won for him a home in Heaven:  
There are his 'high connections.'"





*nelle parole nuove*, Firenze, Le Monnier, 1951, s.v. *Okay*.

Immagine: Macro photograph of the "OK" button on a TV remote control

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