                            Etymology of "Foo"

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Abstract

   Approximately 212 RFCs so far, starting with RFC 269, contain the
   terms 'foo', 'bar', or 'foobar' as metasyntactic variables without
   any proper explanation or definition. This document rectifies that
   deficiency.

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1. Introduction

   Approximately 212 RFCs, or about 7% of RFCs issued so far, starting
   with [RFC269], contain the terms 'foo', 'bar', or 'foobar' used as a
   metasyntactic variable without any proper explanation or definition.
   This may seem trivial, but a number of newcomers, especially if
   English is not their native language, have had problems in
   understanding the origin of those terms. This document rectifies
   that deficiency.

Section 2 below describes the definition and etymology of these words
and Section 3 interprets them as acronyms.

As an Appendix, we include a table of RFC occurrences of these words
as metasyntactic variables.

2. Definition and Etymology

bar /bar/ n. [JARGON]

1. The second metasyntactic variable, after foo and before baz.
   "Suppose we have two functions: FOO and BAR. FOO calls BAR...."

2. Often appended to foo to produce foobar.

foo /foo/

1. interj. Term of disgust.

2. Used very generally as a sample name for absolutely anything, esp.
   programs and files (esp. scratch files).

3. First on the standard list of metasyntactic variables used in
   syntax examples (bar, baz, qux, quux, corge, grault, garply,
   waldo, fred, plugh, xyzzy, thud). [JARGON]

   When used in connection with 'bar' it is generally traced to the
   WW II era Army slang acronym FUBAR ('Fucked Up Beyond All
   Repair'), later modified to foobar. Early versions of the Jargon
   File [JARGON] interpreted this change as a post-war
   bowdlerization, but it now seems more likely that FUBAR was itself
   a derivative of 'foo' perhaps influenced by German 'furchtbar'
   (terrible) - 'foobar' may actually have been the original form.

   For, it seems, the word 'foo' itself had an immediate prewar
   history in comic strips and cartoons. In the 1938 Warner Brothers
   cartoon directed by Robert Clampett, "The Daffy Doc", a very early
   version of Daffy Duck holds up a sign saying "SILENCE IS FOO!"
   'FOO' and 'BAR' also occurred in Walt Kelly's "Pogo" strips. The
   earliest documented uses were in the surrealist "Smokey Stover"
   comic strip by Bill Holman about a fireman. This comic strip
   appeared in various American comics including "Everybody's"
   between about 1930 and 1952. It frequently included the word
   "FOO" on license plates of cars, in nonsense sayings in the
   background of some frames such as "He who foos last foos best" or
   "Many smoke but foo men chew", and had Smokey say "Where there's
   foo, there's fire". Bill Holman, the author of the strip, filled
   it with odd jokes and personal contrivances, including other

nonsense phrases such as "Notary Sojac" and "1506 nix nix".
According to the Warner Brothers Cartoon Companion [WBCC] Holman
claimed to have found the word "foo" on the bottom of a Chinese
figurine. This is plausible; Chinese statuettes often have
apotropaic inscriptions, and this may have been the Chinese word
'fu' (sometimes transliterated 'foo'), which can mean "happiness"
when spoken with the proper tone (the lion-dog guardians flanking
the steps of many Chinese restaurants are properly called "fu
dogs") [PERS]. English speakers' reception of Holman's 'foo'
nonsense word was undoubtedly influenced by Yiddish 'feh' and
English 'fooey' and 'fool'. [JARGON, FOLDOC]

Holman's strip featured a firetruck called the Foomobile that rode
on two wheels. The comic strip was tremendously popular in the
late 1930s, and legend has it that a manufacturer in Indiana even
produced an operable version of Holman's Foomobile. According to
the Encyclopedia of American Comics [EAC], 'Foo' fever swept the
U.S., finding its way into popular songs and generating over 500
'Foo Clubs.' The fad left 'foo' references embedded in popular
culture (including the couple of appearances in Warner Brothers
cartoons of 1938-39) but with their origins rapidly forgotten.
[JARGON]

One place they are known to have remained live is in the U.S.
military during the WWII years. In 1944-45, the term 'foo
fighters' [FF] was in use by radar operators for the kind of
mysterious or spurious trace that would later be called a UFO (the
older term resurfaced in popular American usage in 1995 via the
name of one of the better grunge-rock bands [BFF]). Informants
connected the term to the Smokey Stover strip [PERS].

The U.S. and British militaries frequently swapped slang terms
during the war. Period sources reported that 'FOO' became a
semi-legendary subject of WWII British-army graffiti more or less
equivalent to the American Kilroy [WORDS]. Where British troops
went, the graffito "FOO was here" or something similar showed up.
Several slang dictionaries aver that FOO probably came from
Forward Observation Officer, but this (like the contemporaneous
"FUBAR") was probably a backronym [JARGON]. Forty years later,
Paul Dickson's excellent book "Words" [WORDS] traced "Foo" to an
unspecified British naval magazine in 1946, quoting as follows:

    "Mr. Foo is a mysterious Second World War product, gifted with
    bitter omniscience and sarcasm."

Earlier versions of the Jargon File suggested the possibility that
hacker usage actually sprang from "FOO, Lampoons and Parody", the
title of a comic book first issued in September 1958, a joint

     project of Charles and Robert Crumb. Though Robert Crumb (then in
     his mid-teens) later became one of the most important and
     influential artists in underground comics, this venture was hardly
     a success; indeed, the brothers later burned most of the existing
     copies in disgust. The title FOO was featured in large letters on
     the front cover. However, very few copies of this comic actually
     circulated, and students of Crumb's 'oeuvre' have established that
     this title was a reference to the earlier Smokey Stover comics.
     The Crumbs may also have been influenced by a short-lived Canadian
     parody magazine named 'Foo' published in 1951-52. [JARGON]

     An old-time member reports that in the 1959 "Dictionary of the
     TMRC Language", compiled at TMRC (the Tech Model Railroad Club at
     MIT) there was an entry for Foo. The current on-line version, in
     which "Foo" is the only word coded to appear red, has the
     following [TMRC]:

         Foo: The sacred syllable (FOO MANI PADME HUM); to be spoken
         only when under obligation to commune with the Deity. Our first
         obligation is to keep the Foo Counters turning.

     This definition used Bill Holman's nonsense word, then only two
     decades old and demonstrably still live in popular culture and
     slang, to make a "ha ha only serious" analogy with esoteric
     Tibetan Buddhism. Today's hackers would find it difficult to
     resist elaborating a joke like that, and it is not likely 1959's
     were any less susceptible. [JARGON]

  4. [EF] Prince Foo was the last ruler of Pheebor and owner of the
     Phee Helm, about 400 years before the reign of Entharion. When
     Foo was beheaded by someone he called an "eastern fop" from
     Borphee, the glorious age of Pheebor ended, and Borphee rose to
     the prominence it now enjoys.

  5. [OED] A 13th-16th century usage for the devil or any other enemy.
     The earliest citation it gives is from the year 1366, Chaucer A B
     C (84): "Lat not our alder foo [devil] make his bobance [boast]".
     Chaucer's "Foo" is probably related to modern English "foe".

  6. Rare species of dog.

     A spitz-type dog discovered to exist after having long been
     considered extinct, the Chinese Foo Dog, or Sacred Dog of
     Sinkiang, may have originated through a crossing of Northern
     European hunting dogs and the ancient Chow Chow from Mongolia or
     be the missing link between the Chinese Wolf and the Chow Chow.
     It probably derives its name from foochow, of the kind or style

      prevalent in Foochow, of or from the city of Foochow (now Minhow)
      in southeast China. [DOG]

   foobar n.

      [JARGON] A widely used metasyntactic variable; see foo for
      etymology. Probably originally propagated through DECsystem
      manuals by Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) in 1960s and early
      1970s; confirmed sightings there go back to 1972. Hackers do not
      generally use this to mean FUBAR in either the slang or jargon
      sense. It has been plausibly suggested that "foobar" spread among
      early computer engineers partly because of FUBAR and partly
      because "foo bar" parses in electronics techspeak as an inverted
      foo signal.

   foo-fighter n.

      World War II term for Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs) noted by
      both German and British military. See [FF] and entry above for
      "foo".

3. Acronyms

   The following information is derived primarily from the compilations
   at University Cork College <http://www.ucc.ie/acronyms> and Acronym
   Finder <http://www.AcronymFinder.com> generally filtered for computer
   usage.

   .bar:

      Generic file extension which is not meant to imply anything about
      the file type.

   BAR:

      Base Address Register

      Buffer Address Register

   FOO:

      Forward Observation Observer.

      FOO Of Oberlin. An organization whose name is a recursive
      acronym. Motto: The FOO, the Proud, the FOO. See
      <http://cs.oberlin.edu/students/jmankoff/FOO/home.html>.

      File Open for Output. An NFILE error code [RFC1037].

   FOOBAR:

      FTP Operation Over Big Address Records [RFC1639]. (Particularly
      appropriate given that the first RFC to use "foo", [RFC269], was
      also about file transfer.)

   FUBAR:

      Failed UniBus Address Register - in a VAX, from Digital Equipment
      Corporation Engineering.

      Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition/Repair - From US Military in
      World War II. Sometimes sanitized to "Fouled Up ...".

   FUBARD - Past tense of FUBAR.

Appendix

   Below is a table of RFC occurrences of these words as metasyntactic
   variables. (This excludes other uses that are reasonably clear like
   "vertical bar" or "bar BoF".) Many of these uses are for example
   domain names. That usage may decrease with the specification in [RFC
   2606] of a Best Current Practice for example domain names.

RFC#	bar	foo	foo.bar foobar	fubar	#
269	X	X			1
441	X	X			2
614		X			3
686		X			4
691		X			5
733	X	X			6
742		X			7
743	X	X			8
756		X			9
765	X	X			10
772	X	X		X	11
775			X		12
780	X	X		X	13
788	X	X			14
810	X	X	X		15
819		X			16
821	X	X			17
822	X	X			18
882	X	X			19
883		X			20
897	X	X			21
913		X			22
921	X	X			23
934		X			24
952	X	X	X		25
959			X		26
976			X		27
977		X	X		28
987			X		29
1013		X			30
1033	X	X			31
1035		X			32
1037		X			33
1056	X	X	X		34
1068		X			35
1137			X		36

RFC					#
1138		X	X			37
1148		X	X			38
1173			X			39
1176			X			40
1186		X				41
1194		X				42
1196		X				43
1203		X	X			44
1288		X				45
1291		X				46
1309		X				47
1327		X	X			48
1341	X	X	X			49
1343		X	X			50
1344		X				51
1348			X			52
1386		X				53
1408		X				54
1411		X				55
1412		X				56
1459	X	X	X	X		57
1480		X				58
1505		X				59
1519		X				60
1521	X	X				61
1523		X				62
1524		X	X			63
1526	X	X				64
1535	X	X	X			65
1536	X		X			66
1537		X	X			67
1563		X				68
1564			X			69
1572		X				70
1573		X				71
1622		X				72
1635			X			73
1636		X	X			74
1642		X				75
1645			X			76
1649		X				77
1664			X			78
1681			X			79
1697		X				80
1716		X				81
1718		X				82
1730	X	X	X			83
1734			X			84

```
| 1738 |     | X |     |     | 85  |
| 1783 |     |   |  X  |     | 86  |
| 1784 |     |   |  X  |     | 87  |
| 1786 |  X  | X |     |     | 88  |
| 1813 |  X  | X |     |     | 89  |
| 1835 |     | X |  X  |     | 90  |
| 1856 |     |   |  X  |     | 91  |
| 1861 |     |   |  X  |     | 92  |
| 1866 |     | X |     |     | 93  |
| 1894 |     |   |  X  |     | 94  |
| 1896 |     | X |     |     | 95  |
| 1898 |     | X |     |     | 96  |
| 1913 |     | X |  X  |     | 97  |
| 1945 |  X  | X |     |     | 98  |
| 1985 |     | X |  X  |     | 99  |
| 2015 |  X  | X |     |     | 100 |
| 2017 |     | X |     |     | 101 |
| 2033 |  X  | X |     |     | 102 |
| 2045 |     |   |  X  |     | 103 |
| 2046 |  X  | X |     |     | 104 |
| 2049 |  X  | X |     |     | 105 |
| 2055 |     | X |     |     | 106 |
| 2060 |  X  | X |  X  |     | 107 |
| 2065 |     | X |     |     | 108 |
| 2068 |     |   |  X  |     | 109 |
| 2071 |     | X |     |     | 110 |
| 2088 |     |   |  X  |     | 111 |
| 2109 |     | X |     |     | 112 |
| 2110 |     | X |  X  |     | 113 |
| 2111 |  X  | X |  X  |     | 114 |
| 2141 |     | X |     |     | 115 |
| 2150 |     | X |     |     | 116 |
| 2152 |     | X |     |     | 117 |
| 2156 |     | X |  X  |     | 118 |
| 2163 |     |   |  X  |     | 119 |
| 2167 |     |   |  X  |     | 120 |
| 2168 |     |   |  X  |     | 121 |
| 2169 |     |   |  X  |     | 122 |
| 2180 |  X  | X |     |     | 123 |
| 2193 |  X  | X |     |     | 124 |
| 2224 |     | X |     |     | 125 |
| 2227 |  X  | X |     |     | 126 |
| 2233 |     | X |     |     | 127 |
| 2234 |  X  | X |  X  |     | 128 |
| 2243 |     | X |     |     | 129 |
| 2255 |     | X |  X  |     | 130 |
| 2280 |  X  | X |     |     | 131 |
| 2295 |     | X |     |     | 132 |
```

ID					#
2302		X			133
2311	X				134
2326	X	X	X		135
2342		X			136
2348			X		137
2349			X		138
2359			X		139
2369	X	X	X		140
2378		X			141
2384			X		142
2392	X	X	X		143
2396			X		144
2401			X		145
2407			X		146
2421		X			147
2425			X		148
2434		X			149
2446		X	X		150
2447	X	X			151
2458		X	X		152
2459			X		153
2476		X			154
2483	X	X			155
2486		X			156
2505	X	X			157
2518	X	X	X		158
2535		X			159
2538		X			160
2543	X	X	X		161
2554			X		162
2557		X	X		163
2565		X	X		164
2569	X	X			165
2593	X	X			166
2595		X			167
2608		X			168
2609		X			169
2616	X	X	X		170
2622	X	X			171
2626		X			172
2633	X				173
2640		X	X		174
2645			X		175
2650	X				176
2659			X		177
2673		X	X		178
2693		X			179
2704	X	X			180

RFC#	bar	foo	foo.bar foobar	fubar	#
2705	X	X			181
2717		X	X		182
2725	X	X			183
2731	X	X	X		184
2732		X			185
2782		X	X		186
2803		X			187
2806		X			188
2812	X	X	X	X	189
2818	X	X			190
2828		X	X		191
2830	X				192
2831	X	X	X		193
2839		X			194
2846	X	X			195
2853		X			196
2863		X			197
2910		X	X		198
2912		X	X		199
2915		X			200
2926			X		201
2942		X			202
2965		X			203
2967	X	X	X		204
2970		X			205
2993	X	X			206
3010	X	X			207
3023		X			208
3028		X			209
3075	X	X			210
3080		X			211
3092	X	X	X	X	212

Security Considerations

   Security issues are not discussed in this memo.

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