ON THE ORIGIN OF THE WORD *jeep*

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Abstract

The off-road, four-wheel drive vehicle which has become famous worldwide, is generically known, regardless of its manufacturer, as *jeep*, originating in the concept of a vehicle produced in the USA during World War II. The etymology of the common noun *jeep* seems uncertain, therefore this article aims to analyze the three main theories (the GP abbreviation hypothesis, the slang origin and the nickname theory) in order to propose a viable solution.

Key words: *Jeep, jeep, abbreviation, slang, nickname*

Résumé

La voiture tout-terrain à traction intégrale, connue au niveau international, n'importe lequel fût son fabriquant, sous la désignation générique de *jeep*, aura été conçue, en tant que véhicule, aux États-Unis d'Amérique, durant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale. L'étymologie du nom commun *jeep* semble incertaine et c'est la raison pour laquelle, dans le présent article, on analyse les trois principales théories à son sujet (l'hypothèse de l'abréviation GP, l'origine argotique et la théorie du sobriquet), dans le but de proposer une solution viable.

Mots-clés: *Jeep, jeep, abréviation, argot, sobriquet*

The history of the jeep started in 1940, when the American army, against the background of an intensified program for equipping and modernizing the military, launched a bid for a military light, four-wheel drive vehicle, used in reconnaissance missions and other auxiliary military duties. The vehicle had precise technical specifications, and the deadline for designing and manufacturing the test prototype was extremely short. There were two manufacturers bidding and they built the required prototypes: American Bantam Car Company and Willys-Overland Motors. Although Bantam managed to make the prototype within the record deadline required by the army, the company had insufficient production capacity and consequently, the governmental contract was assigned to Willys; later on, since the demand was high, the government granted the Ford company the right to produce the Willys model under license.[1]

From the very beginning, this vehicle was called a *jeep*. The first article using the term, *Jeep creep up Capitol steps*, was written by Katherine Hillyer in February 1941 for *Washington Daily News*[2], and in June 1941, *The Field Artillery Journal* published the article *The versatile jeep*. The origin of the word *jeep* is uncertain and

[1] Up to the 1945 summer, the two companies had produced about 600,000 vehicles.

[2] There are sources arguing that, during the tests, someone asked the driver what it was called: "It's a Jeep", he would say. Later, Irving "Red" Hausmann, the character in question, a test driver at Willys-Overland, specified that he had heard the word from the soldiers who had tested the car at Fort Holabrid.

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highly debated. In an attempt to discover the real etymology of the word, we have consulted, besides the current dictionaries of the English language, the most reliable sites[3] which approach this topic. Thus, we have identified three theories, as follows.

The first theory starts from the initials GP which, through the pronunciation specific to American English colloquial style, resulted in the form *jeep* or *geep*[4], just as the abbreviation VP "vice-president" gave the word *veep*.[5] The decoding of the two initials offers two variants.

The most widespread variant, found in the outstanding dictionaries of the English language, indicates that GP is an abbreviation of the syntagm *general purpose* "general destination/use". The syntagm was used in the military technical language of the time for the category *General Purpose Motor Vehicles* (administrative, tactical, transportation vehicles etc)[6], but it also occurs with strict reference to this model, in military documents from 1943 to 1944.[7] As we have already mentioned, there were two initial prototypes, each having a specific code: Willys MB and Ford GP; the Ford company, with a license for the Willys model, would finally produce the Ford GPW model. GP, as well as GPW, are production codes of Ford. The decoding is carried out as follows: G from *government* (*contract*), P stands for the indicative of the parts manufactured for the 80-inch wheelbase of the vehicle, and W, to mark the Willys license (the abbreviated syntagm is *Government contract 80-inch wheelbase reconnaissance car Willys pattern*).[8]

In conclusion, the syntagm *general purpose* occurs in technical military documents, inaccessible to soldiers, and the initials GPW, which are Ford production codes, are not directly related to the army. While analyzing several pictures of the GPW Ford model, available on Google, we have noticed that the initials GPW occur, with no decoding, on the dashboard serial plate (so cryptic and somehow hard to see, in other words they were ignored and did not influence the language of the military). The theory of the GP initials, regardless of approach, is not realistic (it is yet true that technical abbreviations can trigger psycholinguistic factors for giving a name in American military slang[9]), since the common soldier did not know such technical

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[3] We have cited under *Bibliography* those sites providing objective information, based on real documentation (some belong to linguists), and without flagrant mistakes or fancy etymological solutions (two examples: the word *jeep* would come from the syntagm *just enough essential parts* or from the exclamation in surprise *Jeepers Creepers!*).

[4] This form is rarely used in certain official documents of the army. For instance: "Parts lists and maintenance manuals for the 1941, ¼-ton 4×4 Ford «GEEP»..."; "Distributors shafts on the ¼-ton 4×4 Ford «GEEPs»..." (*Army Motors of WW2*, 1941) apud Notman.

[5] DA, p. 146, 257.

[6] *Book 120 Field Artillery, Automotive Instruction*, 1941 Edition apud Notman.

[7] "…a general purpose, personnel or cargo carrier… designated as ¼-ton 4×4 Truck" (*Training Manual 9-803*) (*Military Manuals*, www.this-old-jeep.com; *The origin of the term* "*jeep*", www. hemetjeepclub.com).; in another similar document (*Training Manual 9-2800*), the technical name of the vehicle is accompanied by the abbreviation GP (*Jeep- Origins of the brand name*, www.ebay.com).

[8] According to the manual, *Service School for U.S. Army Instructors on Ford U.S. Army Vehicles* (1941) published by Ford Motor Company apud Cowdery. Therefore, GP does not come from *Government Pygmy, Grey Poupon, Great Product*, P does not come from *passenger car*, or W, from *War Department*, etc., as we have found on many sites dedicated to the history of and passion for these vehicles.

[9] For the lexico-semantic and psycholinguistic area referring to American military slang (examples and bibliography covering the period from the Civil War to the Iraq war and the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001), see Dickson's work.

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details. In our opinion, this pseudoetymology was spread by journalists who had access to this type of information.[10]

The second theory identifies the word with the slang term *jeep* "a new, untested vehicle", which had existed in the language of auto mechanics[11] since World War I; by extension, another meaning is "recruit, rooky". The term was preserved between the two world wars, and in 1940 the word was used to designate a light Dodge truck (½-ton jeep). It is interesting that when the ¼-ton vehicle appeared, there were names circulating in direct relation to the heavy truck (*son-of-a jeep*, *jeepie*).[12] Other veterans remember that the car was initially called *peep*[13], a military slang term meaning "jeep, small military vehicle", probably used to avoid confusion between the two vehicles of different weight, previously mentioned.[14] Actually, the word *jeep* was used in the '30s to designate certain small-sized equipments or gadgets of the American army: for instance, it was the name of a small tractor manufactured by Minneapolis-Moline; the term also occurred in the civilian environment, to designate a truck specially equipped for drilling oil wells (a small-sized equipment). The hypothesis of the slang origin of the term is perfectly valid for the military testing environment (somehow isolated from the rest of the army) where it circulated, but it does not explain how the term actually and instantaneously got into the vocabulary of millions of American soldiers.

The third theory[15] assigns the origin of the word to the name of a character in the *Thimble Theater* comic strip, that people liked a lot because of Popeye the Sailor and Olive Oyl, made by E. C. Segar. In 1936 a new character appeared in the comic strip, and he became popular in newspaper ads: "Watch for Popeye and the Jeep".[16] It is about *Eugene the Jeep*, a sort of wonder-animal, endowed with extraordinary mobility, a puppy that said one word only: *jeep*! (probably a variation from *cheep*[17]). The popularity of this affectionately thought of character, supported by national ads, which had entered the popular culture of the Americans at the beginning of the war, ensured a psycholinguistic background specific to the collective mentality, so that the name of the character was transferred to the vehicle from the very moment of its existence, the result actually being a nickname: this is how the trademark Jeep came into being.[18] It is an American military tradition to give nicknames, affectionate names to gadgets or equipment parts that the military can rely on under hard, war circumstances.[19] A

[10] For instance, in November 1941, Marsh Maslin wrote in *Call-Bulletin*, a San Francisco newspaper: "Do you know why those swift little army cars are called *jeeps*? It's Model G-P produced by that automobile manufacturer – and G-P easily becomes *jeep*" apud Dickson, p. 178; see also note 2.

[11] In military slang, the so-called *grease monkey* "a mechanic's help".

[12] Cf. Notman.

[13] Cf. Massey, Zatz.

[14] The term is probably a variant, obtained by altered pronunciation, of the term *jeep* (Webster, p. 1063) or a variant of *cheep* (COD, p. 756); see also the next note.

[15] See, for instance, O'Conner, Kellerman; Quinion.

[16] Quinion.

[17] Cf. Quinion (*cheep* "chirp").

[18] In 1943, the Willys-Overland company applied for the registration of the trademark Jeep (with a capital letter), and in 1950 the trademark entered the patrimony of the company; today the brand Jeep belongs to the Chrysler corporation. Cf. *Jeep*, en.wikipedia.org.

[19] The affectionate nature of the name was noticed at the time by the army headquarters. Thus, Lt. Col. Edwin S. Van Deusen (MT Chief of Procurement and Engineering) declared, in February 1942, before the SAE assembly (Society of Automotive Engineers) in New York that the car was "affectionately known to millions now as the «jeep»" apud Notman.

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nickname is an onomastic category characterized by emotions and subjectivity, and its emotional content determines, in this case, an essentially appreciative meaning.[20] In our opinion, this is the origin of the common noun *jeep*[21], a deonomastic within the subclass of dezoonyms which now designates any off-road, four-wheel drive vehicle. Yet, we admit that the word may have several different etymologies[22], depending on the environment it was used in (the psycholinguistic approach thus becomes mandatory): the slang origin for the military environment within the motor vehicle sector and the onomastic origin for the entire American army.

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*** *Origin of the term jeep*, www.olive-drab.com.

*** *The origin of the term "jeep"*, www. hemetjeepclub.com.

[20] Cf. ELR, p. 442.

[21] The word family of the word *jeep* includes: *jeepable* "impassable except by jeep (said of a rough road); *jeepny* „a jitney bus built on a jeep body and an important mode of transportation in the Philippines after the war"; *jeeptown*, *jeepville* "Detroit, Michigan (because Army jeeps were manufactured there"; *jeepy* "screwy"; the syntagm *jeep nurse* means "jeep driver" (Dickson, p. 178-179).

[22] The most outstanding dictionaries of the English language provide the same multiple etymology for this term: *general purpose* or/and the nickname after the character *Eugene the Jeep*: COD, p. 537; *Collins*, p. 395; *Webster*, p. 765.

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