

Ham Radio 101: Learning the Lingo

The following is a conversation you *could* hear on your local repeater. *Maybe*. Or not. Work with me.

1. **Ziggy:** WF8BRN, KD8ZIG.
2. **Bernie:** Hey Zig, what's up buddy?
3. **Ziggy:** Hey old man, where are you today?
4. **Bernie:** I'm at the QTH right now, but I'll be mobile in a few minutes. I'm going to pick up that new 6-meter beam I bought. Can you give me a hand putting that up, along with my homebrew 2-meter Yagi?
5. **Ziggy:** Yea, sure, if you are going to do it this afternoon. The XYL has got plans for me later, some new restaurant to try out. Say, did you get any DX this morning?
6. **Bernie:** Oh yea! 10 and 15 were wide open into Europe. I got real good skip into Scotland and a couple of stations in Italy on my very first CQ, mostly on 10. I worked a little CW QRP on 15 into England, just 5 watts! All good QSOs! Lotta fun man!
7. **Ziggy:** Awesome. Hey, settle down old man, you're flat topping a little there, getting so excited, hi hi.
8. **Bernie:** OK, sorry about that. I was just happy to finally get Scotland. Now if I can get a QSL card from that fellow I'll have my DXCC.
9. **Ziggy:** Very good! I didn't know you were that close. Congrats! We should do a DXpedition from over there sometime. That would be fun.
10. **Bernie:** Yea, I hear they got good 807 over there, too. Well, I'll see you about 2:00 pm if that's OK for you, and we'll get this antenna farm tweaked up. I'd better go get that beam. So 73, KD8ZIG from WF8BRN. I'm clear on your final Zig.
11. **Ziggy:** OK, thanks for the QSO and I'll see you later today. 88 to Margie from me. KD8ZIG, QSY to the 345 machine.

Did you follow all of that? If you're somewhat new to ham radio you probably picked up on the meaning of a few new terms, but much of Ziggy and Bernie's conversation may have sailed overhead. Few on-the-air conversations will be as chock-filled with ham jargon as this invented example, but like many other endeavors that have a technical element ham radio has a language all its own. You will pick it up quickly, however. Let's decompose Ziggy and Bernie's chat and interpret it into simple, common language we can all understand! Here we go, line by line.

Line 1: Ziggy's call sign is **KD8ZIG**, and he is calling specifically for Bernie, **WF8BRN**. He simply says Bernie's call sign followed by his own.

Line 4: Bernie is really full of jargon in this transmission! **QTH** is a Q-signal (shorthand signal derived from Morse Code) that refers to one's current position, and commonly used to mean "home" or the "home radio station." Bernie means he is at home. When Bernie says he will be **mobile**, it means he will be away from home and probably transmitting with a moving radio station in his car. A **6-meter beam** is an antenna for the 6-meter radio band, and a **beam** antenna is one that provides improved transmission and reception in one direction – also called a *directional* antenna. Many hams love to **homebrew**, and I don't mean beer. Homebrew equipment, such as antennas or circuits, are *home built* items, usually a ham's pride and joy! Finally, Bernie refers to a specific kind of beam antenna, the **Yagi**, named for a Japanese inventor. In this case, the Yagi directional antenna is for the 2-meter band. So, Bernie has a little antenna project going today, installing two new directional antennas.

Line 5: Ziggy has an evening date with his **XYL**, or "ex-young lady," meaning his wife. Although less common, I have heard the reference XYM, implying *ex-young man*, or husband. But Ziggy quickly gets off social topics and back to serious radio matters, inquiring about Bernie's **DX**: *distance contacts*, meaning radio contacts out of country.

Line 6: Bernie, again loaded with jargon, enthusiastically relates his morning DX contacts with two European nations on **10** and **15**, meaning the 10-meter and 15-meter radio bands. A radio band is said to be **open** when it is reflecting from the ionosphere and allowing long distance contacts by ionosphere **skip**, or repeated reflections between ionosphere and ground of the radio signals. Particularly with the higher frequency HF bands like 10-meters and 15-meters, the band may not be *open* unless solar conditions are very active and the ionosphere is densely charged. That is, the transmissions will pass through the ionosphere and travel into space rather than returning to earth to be received by a DX station. **CQ** is a call that means *calling any station*, frequently used on the HF bands where you are trying to make contact with anyone anywhere. **CW** stands for *continuous wave*, the transmission mode used with International Morse Code to tap out letters and numbers. It is a very power-efficient mode of transmission that is commonly used **QRP**, a Q-signal referring to *low power* or *reduced power* transmission. **QSO** is the Q-signal for an on-the-air conversation, like Ziggy and Bernie are having, or like the contacts Bernie is describing with the European stations. What a mouthful, huh?

Line 7: Ziggy refers to Bernie again as **old man** that in ham lingo is a term of endearment or friendship, a pal or a buddy. However, if your pal or buddy is an XYL, or simply a YL (young lady), you should probably avoid use of this jargon! Ziggy notes Bernie's **flat topping**, otherwise called *over-modulating* or (on FM) *over-deviating*. In other words, Ziggy is telling Bernie that he was too loud or too close to his microphone and causing a distorted audio signal. (You can learn more about over-modulation and over-deviation in the *HamRadioSchool.com Technician License Course* book, Chapter 6.) And just to indicate to Bernie that he is amused by his excitement about the DX contacts, Ziggy ends with **hi hi**, sort of an artificial laughter that some hams like to use. Be aware, genuine, actual, cackling laughter on the air is also allowed and highly encouraged!

Line 8: The Q-signal **QSL** means *acknowledge receipt*, or *message understood*. A **QSL card** is a physical card, much like a postcard, acknowledging a radio contact between stations. QSL cards are used to confirm contacts for various awards, such as the ARRL's **DXCC** award, awarded for contacting stations in 100 different countries around the world.

Line 9: A **DXpedition** is a fun trip for hams to a different country or a remote area from which radio operations are conducted. Ziggy wants to travel to Scotland for such a radio expedition!

Line 10: The **807** to which Bernie refers is a less popular on-air discreet term for ale or beer. This is not to be confused with the popular 807 amplifier tube! If a ham has a number of antennas in the air at his station, it is commonly referred to as an **antenna farm**, as Bernie notes. Bernie issues **73** (often distinct "seven, three" or "seventy-three," but not the plural form "seventy-threes"), meaning *best regards*. You'll hear the 73 term frequently as a salutation. Bernie indicates he is **clear** on Ziggy's **final**: Bernie is done using the frequency or repeater (clear) following Ziggy's final transmission in this QSO (your final).

Line 11: Ziggy bids Bernie's XYL Margie **88**, meaning hugs and kisses – not always well received if the level of familiarity does not fit, but Margie happens to be Ziggy's sister. Finally, Ziggy informs of his **QSY**, another Q-signal meaning he is changing frequency. The **345 machine** (or any similar reference by name or frequency) is another repeater with a frequency ending in 345. Ziggy is switching over to that other repeater.

Note a couple of things that are *not* voiced in this ham radio QSO. In line 3 Ziggy did not ask for Bernie's "10-20" as in CB radio lingo. In fact, there were no "good buddies" or "10-4s" or "smokies" or any of that other CB stuff. Ham lingo and CB lingo do not typically mix in the same on-air circles. Leave the "Chew 'n Choke" and your "Ears" on the channels of the citizen's 11-meter band, where they belong. Many hams do not appreciate hearing CB lingo on the amateur bands.

Hopefully the QSO makes more sense to you now, and you have a little better idea of typical ham conduct on the air. You will find a list of common Q-signals and a list of common ham terms under the Learning menu, in Section 1.2, *Ham Operating Basics*. Don't overuse jargon! Just speak with normal terms in most cases on the air. Clear, normal, unambiguous language is almost always better than jargon for the sake of jargon. But if you want to throw in a Q-signal

or well-used ham term once in a while for efficiency or just to sound cool, go for it! Most hams won't blink an eye. Have fun learning and using ham-speak!