

“Stand(-)up” Diana Livesey (Rose) Prize Essay

As a noun, comedy, of course. Comedian, comic, as an extension. The odd adjective; “he’s a stand-up guy!” Here, you’ll need a hyphen, but that’s where the confusion ends.

Take out the hyphen, though, and you’ve got a verb. Simple, run-of-the-mill transitive, firstly: I stand up, you stand up, he/she/it stands up, etc. Legs and bones and muscles and movement. We don’t have many issues here, grammatically at least.

It’s an imperative quite often (and is forceful, and sometimes a little scary, like this): Stand up, boy, Stand up straight. A hymn in my primary school commanded us to stand up, clap hands, and shout “Thank you Lord” - the power of this imperative is never clearer than when a congregation of eight hundred children obeys it on a Tuesday morning.

Passive, occasionally, and usually depressingly - “she was stood up”. Intransitive next - it stands up, no reason to disbelieve it, or it simply doesn’t need physical support. Maybe this is why our stand-up guy is so stand-up; he stands up. Now, check for a preposition. For yourself, for your friends, for what you believe in. To bullies, to racism, to cancer ... We stand up a lot in English.

As an illustrious Cantab once taught us, what goes up must come down, and this opens up a whole new world of possibilities: Stand(-)down. Though this is the linguistic opposite of stand(-)up, it is not the semantic one. If I stand up, I retract that motion not by standing down, but by sitting down - you cannot literally stand, downwards.

While stand(-)up can be literal and metaphorical, stand(-)down can only be metaphorical, but here it comes into its own. Stand-down, a noun, military leave, a truce. Stand down, a verb, often military too, to admit defeat, to give up, to surrender, to acknowledge your place. A prime minister can stand down, so can a witness in court. There is of course, a very visual aspect to this metaphor: to go down, is to go below. When we stand down, we place ourselves below others, below the position we once held. Though, unlike its sibling, stand(-)down lacks any literal meaning, the wealth of uses demonstrates the flexibility of this simple up-down axis in a idiomatic sphere.

What is surprising, is the marked contrast between the their cultural associations and social implications. As a general rule, when we stand up, we are being brave and taking action, or respectful and formal. A young child stands up to a bully, stands up for himself or herself - the child is brave, the child is making an active decision. If we give a standing ovation, we are showing respect and admiration. Schoolchildren stand up when a teacher enters the room, and Catholic services are full of standing and sitting and standing and sitting again - in standing, we are respecting teachers, and respecting God. When soldiers stand to order, they are being disciplined, orderly, respectful. If somebody stands up in a church, and protests the marriage just before the vows are taken, then they are in a poorly written romantic comedy, but are also being brave and decisive. Stand-up comics are certainly brave, as they risk public humiliation nightly, and unemployment constantly. In JK Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Harry decides to stand up and face the newly-reborn Voldemort, as he would like to die standing up, as his father did.

There can be nobility and bravery in standing down, too. George Washington stood down as the first President of the United States, in a move that is largely remembered as being wise and resolute, that of an old war hero moving on after decades of dutiful service. On the other hand, when Baron Sewel left the House of Lords after being photographed taking cocaine, the verb “stand down” did not carry the Washingtonian tones of dignity and noble legacy. It really is a case-by-case sort of idiom, but generally, when we stand down, we do not do so with the sort of admiration and respect we can expect after standing up. If we stand down from an argument, it is because we have lost, and in standing down, we are demonstrating submission, and possibly even weakness. Though the connotations conveyed by standing down can be difficult to pinpoint, what can be assumed is that we are reaching some sort of conclusion. Stand down references the end of the action, standing up the beginning, and more often than not it is instigation that is considered courageous, as opposed to termination.

There is an interesting automatic association between the physical act and the emotions it conveys, here. We would not dream of being the only audience member still sitting after a performance - we know that would be disrespectful. Whether we sit or stand has a very real place within our non-verbal communication of emotional states. If we are about to hear bad news, we are told to sit down. If we are congratulated, we are told to stand up. If we have crossed a line, we are told to stand down. It is not universal; while some cultures will prostrate themselves before authority, we must rise. Within a culture, this association between emotions and physical position seems matter-of-fact. It is only when removed from these eras and geographies that we begin to see the arbitrariness of it; when, in the Iliad, King Priam bends down and grabs the knees and face of great Achilles, in the position of supplication, his attendants are amazed, but the modern reader is bemused. There is no logical reason why stand(-)up should carry such a host of brave and decisive and respectful messages, but equally, there is no denying that it does.

We stand up a lot in English. Or, at least, we think we're standing up in English, but really we're standing knee-deep in ancient European languages. Unfortunately for those standing up for nationalism, and fortunately for those standing up to it, a little look at the Stand Up family proves we're really not special at all. After the Old English *standan* and *upp*, it's Proto-Germanic. We leave *upp* behind here - this seems to be a Germanic word - but *standan* is likely from the Proto-Indo-European *steh-*. Once you reach this distant ancestor, "stand-up" has a whole range of brothers and sisters all over the world; you *opstaan* in Afrikaans, *stå oop* in Norwegian, *postavít* in Czech, and *staceskar* in the constructed language Ido, Esperanto's lesser-known grandchild. There's an element of onomatopoeia here, that has doubtless helped the *steh-* root cement itself into worldwide dictionaries - the *sta-* of strength, decision, and upwards movement.

The flexibility of "stand(-)up" is not restricted to the English language, either. The Ancient Greek form, ἰστημι, is a true migraine of a verb for any classicist. The accepted authority on Ancient Greek grammar, the Liddell and Scott Dictionary, lists a possible twenty-four meanings for the verb, with usages as varied as marking the beginning of a period of time, weighing something in scales, or being constipated (according to Aristotle).

The Ancient Greeks may have an edge on the vastness - and complexity - of the flexibility of their stand(-)up, but I feel that English has the edge on the ridiculousness of it, and this is the crux of the matter, the true reason why the simple "stand(-)up" warrants an essay all to itself. As final proof of this, I simply offer an example, a grammatically sound and theoretically plausible sentence:

The stand-up stand-up stands up to stand up for stand-up.

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