

Funny Noises
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Your No-Code Accent, and what to do about it...

Many older hams, and many well-read younger ones, are familiar with the famous article titled "Your Novice Accent And What To Do About It." It was written by Keith S. Williams, W6DTY, and published in the November 1956 issue of QST. That was a LONG time ago. Novices licenses had been around for a while and many of them were upgrading to General and "moving down the band." Keith was addressing what now looks like a relatively trivial problem--

"It is increasingly easy to pick out a new General Class operator on c.w. bands. His speed may be up to par and he may have an excellent fist, but his procedure is apt to be rather odd. "

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Almost 50 years later, we have a very similar situation with a lot of recent upgrades and new licensees who have learned code to the mandated 5wpm, popping up all over the HF CW bands. Like the upgraded Novices of the '50s, these guys are welcome on the bands, but many of them are immediately obvious. And they can be more of a problem. They haven't had to learn ANY procedure (much less done a 1 year internship on the Novice bands). Their fists are often terrible, and their speed is far from up to par. Of far more concern, though, is their interference with other operations.

The FCC has recognized their 5wpm skill and given them the keys to the kingdom. Legally they can send a 5wpm CQ on 14.010. Of course that doesn't mean they SHOULD, any more than a 16 year old who has just received a driver's license should immediately start driving in downtown Denver during rush hour.

To cite just two examples of the problem, I have recently heard slow stations begin calling CQ between a DX station and his pileup. Several times, in fact.

The other night I was working a European station when someone began calling CQ right on top of us. At about 7wpm. Naturally he called for a good 5 minutes before I was able to respond with "QRL / FREQ IN USE PSE QSX DE N1FN" sent with the keyer turned down as far as it would go. His response? "N1FN N1FN N1FN DE [his call three times] THANKS FOR THE CALL. YOUR RST IS ..." at which point I moved up the band about a KHz and a half and re-established contact with my European friend. Later I looked up this new "slow code Extra" and sent him an e-mail, welcoming him to this wonderful hobby but suggesting that he ask if the frequency is in use before calling CQ. His reply to my e-mail was apologetic, but he actually

asked me how he was supposed to know if somebody was saying that the frequency was in use if they were sending faster than he copy. To which I replied, “Easy– nobody can say that the frequency is NOT in use, so if you hear ANYTHING it sort of implies that the frequency IS in use.” His response to that was “nobody ever told me.”

Which sort of brings me (finally!) to my point, which is this– “How ARE they supposed to know any better?”

Nobody has told them that they are going into an area where other hams are operating with procedures, traditions, “gentlemen’s agreements” and “rules of the road” that go back a hundred years or more, and code skills that have taken years to develop. It’s true that we have always had similar problems with newbies on SSB, and even 2M FM, but at least with those modes it is reasonably easy to talk to them and provide a little guidance. Unfortunately that doesn’t work with CW, because if the guy can’t effectively use the mode, then YOU can’t use it to explain things to him.

So we have an unfortunate, semi-chaotic situation on the CW bands, and who’s fault is that?

Yours and mine. OK, the ARRL’s fault too, but of course that is you and me. The FCC is probably blameless because they had long since abdicated any responsibility for enforcing “operating practices” not specifically covered by “regulations.”

How are these new chums going to learn things like–

“Set your receiver for maximum sensitivity and minimum selectivity and listen. Ask if the frequency is in use. “

”Code speed is heavy and sinks to the bottom of the band. The lower the frequency, the higher the customary operating speed.”

“14.060 is the QRP calling frequency.”

Yes, the information is in the ARRL Operating Guide. And it’s available here and there on web sites (which is where I found the above-quoted “rules”). The problem is that a lot of these guys don’t know such rules exist, much less how to find out about them.

It seems to me there is really only one practical way to address this problem, and that is to develop a handout that can be given to people when they pass the Morse code test. “Your Guide to HF Fun” would be a great title, but Dave Ingram has already used it. How about “Your Newbie Accent?”

