

One Small Misstep for a Man?

By Rob Kyff

Did Neil Armstrong flub the first sentence spoken on the moon? The audio transmission of his words seems unambiguous: "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." But Armstrong himself always insisted that he had said, "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind."

The indefinite article "a" makes a big difference. With it, the intended contrast between the single step of one man and the huge stride for all human beings is clear. Without it, "man" seems to mean "mankind," so the antithesis is lost. How can a small step for mankind also be a giant leap for mankind? The sentence doesn't make sense.

Armstrong, who was precise and prepared in everything he did, was sure he had said "for a man." "There must be an 'a'," Armstrong said in 1986. "I rehearsed it that way. I meant it that way. And I'm sure I said it that way."

The disparity between the audio recording and Armstrong's recollection could be explained by technology. After all, the audio transmission, which traveled a quarter of a million miles through space, was fuzzy. But numerous analyses by technicians have failed to find any conclusive evidence that the missing "a" was somehow concealed by static.

Then, in 2013, linguistic researchers from Ohio State University and Michigan State University offered another possible explanation. By examining recordings of speech patterns in central Ohio — where Armstrong grew up — they discovered that natives there often blend the two words of the phrase "for a," rendering it as "frrr(uh)," with the "a/uh" sound barely articulated.

One of the researchers, Dr. Laura Dilley of Michigan State, told CNN: "Prior acoustic analyses of Neil Armstrong's recording have established well that, if the word 'a' was spoken, it was very short and was fully blended acoustically with the preceding word. ... His blending of the two words, compounded with the poor sound quality of the transmission, has made it difficult for people to corroborate his claim that the 'a' is there."

As we observe the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 mission, it's somehow reassuring to learn that human history on the moon might not have begun with a verbal gaffe, but instead with verbal grace — an American hero's eloquent words rendered in the heartland accent of his youth. The moon is a long way from the grassy airfield in Wapakoneta, Ohio, where Armstrong took his first flying lessons, but perhaps not as far away as we thought.

Rob Kyff, a teacher and writer in West Hartford, Connecticut, invites your language sightings. Send your reports of misuse and abuse, as well as examples of good writing, via email to WordGuy@aol.com or by regular mail to Rob Kyff, Creators Syndicate, 737 3rd Street, Hermosa Beach, CA 90254.