

AHOY

MAXEY BROOKE
Sweeny, Texas

I was browsing through the dictionary display at the local bookstore. They were featuring the Random House Unabridged. I judge a dictionary by the way it handles etymology. Don't ask me why I decided to check the derivation of HELLO. Perhaps the book was open at that page.

HELLO had about an inch of definitions but no derivation; the last entry was 'esp. Brit., HULLLO'. I flipped forward to HULLLO. There was no derivation and only the definition HALLO. Backward I went to HALLO. There were several definitions, but again no etymology. However, there was an entry that it was a variant of HOLLO. I turned to HOLLO. No derivation, but a notation that it, in turn was a variant of HOLLA. HOLLA was on the same page. And here, at last, was a derivation: 'MF hola, equiv. to ho ahoy + la there'. (Historical note: Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, suggested that 'ahoy' was the proper method of answering his instrument.)

Most Americans answer the telephone with 'hello'. Some individuals will use 'Smithers here' or 'this is Tompkins' or 'warehouse, Ridley'. The answer that drives me up the wall is the laconic 'yeah?'

In Germany, the customary answer is 'here is Mr. So-and-so'. The British and Portuguese ask 'are you there?' In Spain it is 'what is it?' An Italian will say 'ready', and a Russian 'I'm listening'. And the Japanese use the logical answer 'say, say!'

Good-bye.

Click.