



---

---

# Saucers and sightings: the lexicon of UFOLOGY

THOMAS DuBOSE

*An examination of unidentified flying objects  
from linguistic, social, and folkloric perspectives*

---



THE JARGON of few special-interest areas has escaped detailed linguistic analysis to the extent that ufology has. Yet anyone who bothers to wade through dozens of books about unidentified flying objects will find etymological curiosities aplenty: a major item of jargon that arise out of a gross misconception, and workaday words of lowly origin invested with the aura of the otherworldly. The two lexical items that demand closest examination are obviously “flying saucer” and “UFO.” The former has a curious, colorful history – both on its own and in its interaction with the latter. Indeed, the history of ufology is reflected in the interplay between these two terms in ufological texts over the past 45 years.

The term “flying saucer” (FS) originated in misunderstanding. After businessman and pilot Kenneth Arnold, on June 24, 1947, reported seeing a formation of inexplicable objects flying near Mount Rainier in Washington state, Bill Becquette, a reporter for the *East Oregonian* of Pendleton, Oregon, asked him to describe the manner in which the objects flew: “well, they flew erratic,” Arnold replied, “like a saucer [would] if you skipped it across water” (Devereux 29). Becquette seems to have misconstrued this adverbial of manner – suggestive of skimming, dipping flight – as some sort of adjectival of shape, for in his article of June 25, he describes Arnold’s slighting of “Nine bright saucer-like objects” (Thompson 1). His follow-up article on June 27 contains the first use of the

term FS: “Kenneth Arnold said Friday (June 27) he would like to get on one of his 1,200 mile-an-hour ‘flying saucers’ and escape from the furor caused by his story” (Thompson 2). This lead-in line perpetuated the misconception of the objects as having truly been saucer-shaped and fostered a later misconception that Arnold had coined the term himself. Readers overlooked the fact that the “quote” is in indirect discourse and that FS is Becquette’s phrase and not Arnold’s. Arnold actually said that the objects looked like tadpoles (Devereux 28).

Despite its spurious origins, the phrase FS “was a term which immediately attracted media interest and is probably the facet of the

---

*THOMAS DuBOSE received his Ph.D. in English Linguistics from the University of Texas in 1990. His dissertation analyzed the canons of correctness and propriety underlying recent American usage criticism. In addition to this fascination with ‘pop’ grammarians, his scholarly interests include folklore and mythology, especially the linguistic aspects of these disciplines. His current projects include studies applying prototype theory to ‘pop’ vampirology – exploring how connotations of the vampirine vocabulary may have altered as a result of the glut of contemporary vampire fiction inspired by the immensely popular romantic, revisionist vampire tales of Anne Rice. DuBose has taught in various American universities for twenty years. He currently works at the Department of English, Louisiana State University, Shreveport.*

phenomenon most responsible for attracting public attention. It was the right phrase for the mood of the moment; one of the most enduring advertising slogans in the world" (Spencer 116). A convenient, memorable term thus came to function as a marketing device, an easy and down-to-earth moniker around which out-of-this-world beliefs could cluster and be sold to a wide audience.

However much a misnomer FS was, it enjoyed wide usage in the late '40s and early '50s among believers and investigators, and it continued to be employed frequently through the late '60s. The first reputable ufological text, Air Force Major Donald Keyhoe's *Flying Saucers Are Real* (1950) features it in the title as does Arnold's own book, written with Raymond Palmer, *The Coming of the Saucers* (1952) (Flammonde 464–467). Scientists and military figures who voiced their ufological faith in the press seem to have had no qualms with the term. Such respected people as scientists Dr. Walter Reidel (1952) and Dr. Herman Oberth (1954) and Air Chief Marshal Lord Dowding (1954) all employ FS in their public assertions about the phenomenon's reality (Edwards 183). President Truman used FS in his neutral statement to the public in 1950, "Flying saucers, given that they exist, are not constructed by any power on earth" (Flammonde 2). However, from the mid-1950s on, FS had a lexical rival, and the interplay and interchange between this new bit of jargon – UFO – and FS present interesting examples of how terms evolve and interact within the lexicon of a marginalized field of interest.

The 1989 supplement to *The Oxford English Dictionary* lists 1953 as the first recorded use of UFO in print – in an article by Major Keyhoe in *Air Line Pilot* – but the entry is unclear as to whether the use is of "unidentified flying object" or its acronym. As late as the early and mid 60s, writers tended to use the full phrase first in early paragraphs (as a proper noun, with initial letters capitalized), then follow immediately with UFO in parentheses, then proceed to employ the acronym without explanation (cf. Edwards 1). Air Force Captain Edward Ruppelt, one of the first military men to be assigned to investigate the phenomenon, supposedly coined the term "to distinguish what appeared to be rational sighting reports from ones sounding like excerpts from fairy tales or nightmares" (Flammonde 24). Ruppelt was the first to use the term in the title of a

book, the no-nonsense, scientific-sounding *Report on Unidentified Flying Objects* (1956).

One reason for the rise and popularity of UFO probably is the devaluation of FS within ufology. As Paris Flammonde explains, the term "flying saucer" soon came to mean very little. As reports of objects of all different shapes poured in, the use of FS as a reference to shape, however etymologically specious, became inappropriate. Soon, FS "was applied to everything in space, in the atmosphere, hovering near the surface of the earth, or on the ground that observers were unable to categorize ... It was so all-encompassing as to have no meaning" (Flammonde 25). UFO allowed for greater accuracy by being less specific about shape.

Moreover, UFO may be a term that can suit believers and skeptics and everyone in between. The purest denotation of UFO is something airborne that cannot or has not yet been identified or adequately explained. Skeptics could employ the term as willingly as believers, as Isaac Asimov demonstrates when he responds to the question "Do you believe in UFOs?" with this reply:

I assume that by UFO you mean "unidentified flying objects." I certainly believe that many people have seen objects in the air or sky that they can't identify, and those are UFOs. But then, many people can't identify the planet Venus, or a mirage (14).

Perhaps UFO in its early days helped mitigate – or at least detract from – the sheer lunacy that FS was beginning to imply, as no mass landings of extraterrestrials took place and as contactees came forward to regale the press with bizarre tales of encounters with Venusians and Saturnians. As Keith Thompson indicates, the Air Force surely would have found FS "too rich for its imaginal palate" (12) at this point – and so might have many "serious" ufologists who scorned the nonsense of the contactees. For these people, the Air Force's adoption of UFO constituted a "ceremonial necessity" – the bestowing upon the obscure flying objects of their desire a "formal designation" (Thompson 12). Credence was lent their interests by the bestowing of an official name.

Another aspect of UFO that may have caused it to find favor with "buffs" is the ease with which the acronym permits morphological catenation. The *OED* lists one derivative of FS – "saucerian" – but only one serious ufologist, Paris Flammonde, ever used it and related

forms, and then only briefly in the 1970s (461). Paris Flammonde is also the only ufologist to employ FS and UFO to distinguish different phenomena and types of reports: UFO for reports of any strange object; FS for objects reported by witnesses to suggest a craft of machine (26–27).

It is easy to see why “saucerian” and “saucerology” didn’t catch on – they seem too awkward, too redolent of crockery and crack-pots. But UFO seems tailor-made for comfortable derivation, with its final *o* causing it to take neatly the endings often affixed to etyma derived from Greek: e.g., “philology”/“philologist”; “biology”/“biologist.” “Ufology” as “the study of UFOs” first appeared in 1959 in an article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, “ufologist” in 1963 in *New Scientist*, and “ufological” in the *New Yorker* in 1966. (These citations are from the *OED*; I suspect that the terms appeared earlier in actual ufological texts.) Other derivatives include “ufoism” and “ufologism” (interest in UFOs), “ufonauts” (beings associated with UFOs) {Flammonde, 462}, and “UFOcal” (a portmanteau word designating an area where many UFOs are repeatedly seen) {Spencer 303}. The VCV contours of the acronym also allow for pronounceable acronyms featuring UFO: *BUFORA* (British UFO Research Association), *MUFON* (Mutual UFO Network), and *CUFOS* (Center for UFO Studies), (Spencer 56–57; 220; 68). And finally – and most obviously – UFO is much shorter than “flying saucer.”

After UFO emerged, a curious thing happened. Despite the lexical niche that it nicely filled, both believers and skeptics couldn’t seem to let go of FS. UFO began to eclipse FS in the 1960s, but FS continued to serve a purpose. One can detect a definite paradigm in the employment of FS and UFO during this decade: FS is employed early on in a ufological text for sensation, for “imaginal richness,” for the sake of attracting attention, but then the writer switches to UFO when serious discussion begins:

- Donald Menzel, an early skeptic, called his 1963 book *The World of Flying Saucers*, but in a ten-page excerpt he uses FS simply to introduce the subject and then proceeds to employ UFO (David 139–150).

- A 1966 editorial in the Catholic periodical *America* supports Michigan Congressman Gerald Ford’s “call for a congressional inquiry” into the Air Force’s handling of “flying saucer”

reports, but then speaks only of “UFOs,” eschewing any further use of the FS word (211–212).

- Evert Clark, in a skeptical, condescending article in the August 24, 1966, *New York Times* uses FS in the title, “‘Flying Saucer’ Might Be a Ball of Ionized Air,” uses FS in the first of 20 short paragraphs, but then employs UFO until the closing paragraphs (157–159).

- In the first really big best-seller in ufology, Frank Edward’s 1966 *Flying Saucers – Serious Business*, Edwards uses FS in his dramatic title, but hardly ever again. In fact, he interrupts his first chapter to decry the FS-word, calling it “both inadequate and outmoded by 1960.” He insists that “informed civilian researchers call them UFO’s” and sniffs disdainfully that use of FS “sort of dates you” (18).

- When Jay David edited his invaluable, long out-of-print anthology in 1967, he entitled it *The Flying Saucer Reader*, but he employs UFO far more often than FS in his introduction and headnotes.

This paradigmatic employment of FS for drama and attention-getting and UFO for serious discussion is obvious, and everyone in the ’60s was doing it: Believers who don’t like FS, and skeptics who don’t like the belief-system. This pattern of usage may be traced to the late 1950s, to the ufological text with the most illustrious author: Carl Jung’s *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*. The first English translation of Jung’s book appeared in 1958, and the FS/UFO employment is identical to that which runs through the ufological texts of the Age of Aquarius of which Jung foretold. The title of the English translation contains FS, and the text uses FS more than UFO in the preface to the translation – four times as opposed to three (3–4). Thereafter, however, Jung (or his translator) consistently uses UFO practically to the exclusion of the FS word: Each of the five chapters contains UFO in its title, and FS hardly ever again appears in the text after the prefatory material (cf. 87).

Whatever usefulness for topicalization and sensation FS may have had in the 1960s, the FS-word all but disappears from popular ufological usage after 1971, when the last noteworthy book using FS in its title in a straightforward way appeared – Paris Flammonde’s *The Age of Flying Saucers* (cf. Spencer 265). Even though Flammonde is still playing around with the phrase in the text of his 1976 book, he

titled it *UFO Exist!*. After 1971, it seems that everybody interested in the subject abandons FS except when explaining the term's origin and chronicling the early days of the phenomenon or when playing with the word for alliteration or humor. After poring over bibliographies, I can find only four books since 1971 that have FS in their titles, all presenting the above qualities and motives: *The Flying Saucers* (Arthur Shuttlewood, 1976), *Socorro Saucer* (Ray Stanford, 1978), *Phenomenon: Forty Years of Flying Saucers* (John Spencer and Hilary Evans, 1988), and *Documents and Supporting Information Related to Crashed Flying Saucers and Operation Majestic Twelve* (a 1987 book by Bruce Maccabee about (in)famous ufological lore pertaining to the 1950s) {cf. bibliographies of Spencer 337–340 and Thompson 264–269}.

In ufological texts after 1971, especially as the 70's wear on into the 80's, UFO is used with seldom-wavering constancy by everyone interested in the field for whatever reason. Even Philip Klass, most active and aggressive of debunkers of UFO reports, uses UFO in the titles of his writings and within the texts themselves. His newsletter is called *Skeptics UFO Newsletter* (Thompson 276). Likewise, in the lengthiest and one of the most widely respected disquisitions ever written on the topic by a "believer," Jacques Vallee's trilogy of *Dimensions* (1988), *Confrontations* (1990), and *Revelations* (1991), I can find only six uses of FS in 845 pages. All these appear in definitions, during ufological history lessons, or in jokes (cf. *Revelations* 3).

A final interesting point to be made about UFO, FS, and, indeed, most of the ufological lexicon is that the terms, though pertaining to matters extremely extramundane, are themselves so very mundane. From the very beginning of ufology in 1947, FS had a colloquial sound, suggestive more of the china closet than of the spaceways. "Unidentified flying object," though smacking of officialese, is hardly a challenge to anyone's vocabulary skills. Other terminology is equally homely. For example, "an exceeding normal media coverage of UFO during a limited time or within a restricted area" is a "flap" (Flammonde 458). A prolonged spate of sightings, perhaps over months or even years, is a "wave." As John Keel explains, "an area where UFOs appear repeatedly year after year" is designated a "window" (quoted in Devreux 24).

Even in the alien-abduction scenario – the most prominent trend in current ufology and one of the strangest in its short, strange life – the terminology employed is remarkably workaday. "Abduction" may be a slightly posher term than "kidnapping" or "taking" (the equivalent term from fairy folklore), but it is hardly an exotic word. In the dominant abduction paradigm, the little, big-eyed aliens are reportedly gray. Ufology has not tagged these creatures with some elaborate coinage such as *alieni glauci*, but has simply dubbed them "grays."

Perhaps the most widely-known bit of ufological terminology other than UFO and FS is probably "sighting," the observation of a seemingly inexplicable aerial phenomenon. This term has simply been borrowed from nautical jargon: *The Oxford English Dictionary* cites its use in earlier centuries by sailors to refer to glimpses of shore from ships at sea. Even when a ufologist sets out deliberately to create terminology, the results seem to reflect simple, nonelevated usage: for example, Dr. Allen Hynek's famous categorization for certain types of sightings: Close Encounters of the First, Second, and Third Kinds (Spencer 76). The headword and its preheadword modifier are self-explanatory: all one needs is a few details about the prepositional phrases that follow to grasp the classificatory scheme. In ufology, it seems, simplicity of phrase is at a premium.

As ufology moves into an especially productive new phase – that of the alien-abduction scenario – it will be interesting to see what new lexical items arise and what old ufological terms gain wider use and greater notoriety. Already, as a result of the abduction scenario, the term "ufology" itself has come to receive the ultimate "pop" accolade in the States – imprinting on a T-shirt. In bright lettering on dark cloth, a mock-up of a dictionary definition of "ufology" is featured on a shirt as a promotional "tie-in" for the FOX TV series *The X-Files*, which relates the adventures of FBI agents in pursuit of extraterrestrials and their hapless human abductees. EAT

## References

- Anonymous. 1966, 9 April. Editorial: 'America'. In David, pp. 211–212.
- Asimov, Isaac. 1982. Introduction. *Flying Saucers*. Edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin Harry Greenberg & Charles C. Waugh. New York: Fawcett Crest.

Clark, Evert. 1966, 23 Aug. "Flying Saucer' Might Be a Ball of Ionized Air." In *New York Times*. Reprinted in David, pp. 157-159.

Clark, Jerome. 1963. *Unexplained!* Detroit: Visible Ink Press.

Devereux, Paul, with David Clarke, Andy Roberts & Paul McCartney. 1989. *Earth Lights Revelation*. London: Blandford.

David, Jay, ed. 1967. *The Flying Saucer Reader*. New York: Signet.

Edward, Frank. 1966. *Flying Saucers - Serious Business*. New York: Bantam.

Eicher, Peter. 1993. *The Elvis Sightings*. New York: Avon.

Flammonde, Paris. 1976. *UFO Exist!* New York: Ballantine.

Jung, C. G. 1978. *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*. Tr. R. F. C. Hull. Los Angeles: Princeton University Press.

*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989 edition.

Spencer, John. 1991. *The UFO Encyclopedia*. New York: Avon.

Thompson, Keith. 1991. *Angels and Aliens: UFOs and the Mythic Imagination*. New York: Addison-Wesley.

Vallee, Jacques. 1990. *Confrontations*. New York: Ballantine.

—. 1988. *Dimensions*. Foreword by Whitley Strieber. New York: Ballantine.

—. 1991. *Revelations*. New York: Ballantine.

Randles, Jenny & Paul Fuller. 1993. *Crop Circles: A Mystery Solved*. 2nd edition. London: Robert Hale.

## Vogue words 2 (see p. 22)

VOGUE  
ITALIA

### Moda

- 82 POST MODERN EDGE. Foto di Steven Meisel. Fashion editor Joe McKenna.
- 104 PLEASE. BE SIMPLE. Disegni di Mats Gustafson.
- 112 COMBED BY: MR. KENNETH. Foto di Steven Meisel. Fashion editor Joe McKenna.
- 124 PATRICIA ARQUETTE. Foto di Bruce Weber. Fashion editor Joe McKenna. Intervista di Manuela Cerri Goren.
- 134 YELLOW. Foto di Albert Watson.
- 144 NEWS PORTFOLIO. Foto di Michel Comte. Fashion editor Anna Dello Russo.
- 162 PSYCHOPTICAL. Foto di Ellen von Unwerth. Fashion editor Alice Gentilucci.

### Beauty & Fitness

- 176 LET'S GET HEALTHY. Foto Juergen Teller. Fashion editor Camilla Nickerson. Testo di Fabia Di Drusco.

### Costume

- 100 D.P. Doppie pagine di Anna Piaggi: PIÙ PIUME. Foto di Alfa Castaldi.
- 120 ANGELI. Disegno di Mats Gustafson. Testo di Anna Gloria Forti.
- 122 NORMAN PARKINSON di Martin Harrison

vogue

