Something cool about awesome and neat

by Sabine Eiche

The waitress waited while I studied the menu. "A hamburger, please, and coffee," I said.

"Awesome," replied the waitress.

Awesome? If I'd asked for a whole roasted suckling pig followed by peacock pie, that would have been awesome, I thought. But what's so awe-inspiring, reverential or appalling – the standard English definitions of awesome – about a hamburger?

Having lived abroad for three decades, I wasn't aware that in the meantime awesome had become a reflex response for myriad occasions. It joined another reflex response, with a much older history – cool.

Well, if we're going to keep on uttering these words several times a day, why not become better acquainted with their histories?

Awe stems from the Old English word "ege," denoting terror, anguish, fear or dread. Two English names for boys, Egesa and Egeslic, conserve those meanings – they're perfect names for villains in the kind of fantasy stories so popular nowadays, but far from appealing in real life.

Even after "ege" had been transformed into awe, it kept a tinge of fear. Awful, the adjectival form of awe, is still used correctly to mean terrible, but the sense that was prevalent in the 17th-18th centuries – solemnly impressive or sublimely majestic – is now ignored, if not forgotten. The adverb awfully, however, has sunk to the role of a mere intensifier with the meaning of very.

Cool, too, has its roots in an Old English word – "col." (If you're interested in etymology, you may have noticed that many of the short words in our language derive from Old English, rather than Latin or Greek – for example, good, bad, love, hate, friend, fiend, hot, cold, fire, ice, etc.)

As a colloquial or slang word, cool lays claim to a great range of meanings, some of them contradictory. It functions as an adjective, noun and verb. Beatniks, in the 1950s and 1960s, used cool to indicate appreciation – as in, that's cool, meaning that's great, excellent, wonderful. At the same time, cool also implied unexcited, controlled, calm – in sayings such as cool-headed, don't loose your cool, or cool it. As a matter of fact, it already had that sense in the 18th century, when the simile cool as a cucumber was popular.

Fielding, in his 1728 novel "Tom Jones," introduced the use of cool to stress the amount in a large sum of money – "Mr. Watson … declared he had lost a cool hundred and would play no longer."

Phrases such as a cool fish or a cool customer, alluding to a person who is assured, impudent, or uncaring, date back to the early 19th century, and they're still common enough today. In the 1940s, cool acquired the new sense of sophisticated, fashionable, for instance in reference to dress.

The third word that concerns me in this column – neat – doesn't derive from Old English, but rather from the Latin "nitidus" (shining, clean) by way of the Old French "net." During much of the 19th century it was used in an ironical sense to mean rare or fine. But around 1956, neat became slang to describe something pleasing or attractive. And it originated with – Canadian teenagers! Now, that's cool, awesome and neat.