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WORD ON THE STREET

Kansas, the First Home of Jaywalking?

By Ben Zimmer

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After a series of traffic fatalities in New York City, the new administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio has taken a sterner line on jaywalking, with police issuing a flurry of tickets to errant pedestrians.

But jaywalking remains a fact of life in the city, even for the mayor himself. The New York Post a couple of weeks ago snapped a photo of Mr. de Blasio strolling through an intersection in Brooklyn while a "Don't Walk" light flashes.

The trifling crime of jaywalking goes back to the early days of the automotive era at the turn of the 20th century. The term originated as a way to cajole pedestrians into making way for the newly dangerous traffic speeding through their streets.

Thanks to some new research by the Canadian writer Paul McFedries, we now have a much clearer picture of how "jaywalking" came into being. Mr. McFedries runs the website WordSpy.com, which tracks new words and phrases entering the language, and maintains the pedestrian-friendly Three MPH blog. In researching the term, his passions for words and walking collided.

"Jaywalking" was born in the Midwest, where "jay" has long been a put-down for an ignorant or unsophisticated person. Early usage centered in Kansas, where "jay" could be applied to careless operators of the newfangled motorcars, as well as unsuspecting pedestrians. A 1904

article in the Lawrence Daily Journal, about 40 miles west, reported that "Kansas City is conducting a crusade against the 'jay driver.' "

Two years later, on April 7, 1906, the "jaywalker" first made his appearance in the Kansas City Star. This initial usage discovered by Mr. McFedries referred to a man recklessly cutting a corner. "You're a jay walker, sir," yells a fellow pedestrian, while an observer chimes in, "No man should go around a corner that way. It's just as jay as for a driver to 'cut corners.' " The Star supplemented the story with a drawing showing the jaywalker's path.

In 1909, a newspaper from Hutchinson, Kan., used "jaywalker" in the now-familiar sense of a pedestrian who improperly crosses the street. By then, the usage was spreading beyond Kansas; that same year, the Chicago Daily Tribune observed that "chauffeurs assert with some bitterness that their 'joy riding' would harm nobody if there were not so much jay walking."

"I wish I could tell you that, more than 100 years later, drivers and pedestrians were on good terms, but that's far from the case," Mr. McFedries ruefully writes. But if authorities are going to continue to complain about "jaywalkers" in New York and elsewhere, how about reviving "jay drivers" to acknowledge that traffic safety is a two-way street?

--Ben Zimmer is the executive producer of Vocabulary.com and VisualThesaurus.com.

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FIG. 4 The first known illustration of “jay walkers.” This 1911 cartoon precedes the earliest *Oxford English Dictionary* citation for the word by six years. In its early definition, jaywalkers obstructed other pedestrians by their irregular paths and their susceptibility to distraction by sidewalk vendors (such as the strop oil salesman depicted here). Jaywalkers were a nuisance more to others afoot than to motorists, depicted here as rare, peripheral, and aristocratic. (Source: “In Simple, Child-Like New York,” *Kansas City Star*, 30 April 1911, sec. 4, p. 1.)

To overcome long-standing traditions of street use, motordom appealed to modernity. “We are living in a motor age,” explained John Hertz of Chicago’s Yellow Cab Company. “And we must have not only motor age education, but a motor age sense of responsibility.” According to an industry trade journal, “this is a changing world and we have to adapt ourselves to the changes.” A car dealer told city people to get with the times. “The automobile is here to stay,” he wrote. “The streets are for vehicle traffic, the sidewalks for pedestrians.”⁴⁴ Because *jaywalker* bore the right connotation

Walker” (editorial), *Post-Standard*, 25 November 1913, 4, which placed most of the blame for pedestrian casualties on motorists.

44. John Hertz, quoted in “Agree on Code of Sane Speed for Speedy U.S.,” *Chicago Tribune*, 25 March 1926, 6; J. L. Jenkins, “New Police Order Bars Jay Walkers at Busy Crossing,” *Chicago Tribune*, 28 October 1923, A12; Thomas J. Hay, “Carelessness, Not Speed, Cause of Auto Mishaps,” *Chicago Tribune*, 25 January 1920, 15.

