



An early appearance of the term 'my bad' came in the movie *Clueless*, starring Justin Walker and Alicia Silverstone.

BAD, BADDER, MY BAD The evolution of a language

By BLAINE KYLLO

I was ankle deep in the damp grass on one of those crystal spring mornings when the sky looks like the sea. The air had a slight chill, which made the conditions perfect for our ultimate (frisbee football) game.

I zipped down the field, wide open for an end-zone pass. I looked back over my shoulder, then stopped and watched the disc sail over my head, far past the end of the field.

As our team regrouped, the guy who threw the disc came up to me. He shook his head and said something. I thought I misheard him, thought my ears needed cleaning. "What was that?"

He repeated himself: "Sorry, my bad." I realized my hearing was fine. My comprehension was the problem.

It was easy enough to glean his meaning given the context. My friend was apologizing for his poor throw. He was accepting blame.

In the following weeks, I began to hear "my bad" everywhere. If I didn't think it was such an interesting turn of phrase, I would have been annoyed. But I was fascinated by the kinds of people who were saying it. Women and men. Skaters, business people, high-tech employees and DJs. People from every age group, cultural background, and geographical region in North America were suddenly saying "my bad."

That was in May, and I've been asking people ever since where they first heard it. The most common response was *South Park*, the animated comedy series that moved quickly from cult program to merchandise money-maker. In *South Park*, kids say "my bad" all the time.

Then I stumbled on to an early use of "my bad" on a CD entitled *Quannum Project*, which was released in 1999. Hip hop artist The Gift of Gab says "my bad" during a mic break recorded on the *Late Nite Hype* radio program in Los Angeles.

I thought it likely that *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone had appropriated the phrase from inner city, hip hop culture. It wouldn't have been the first time a couple of middle-class white guys thought some black thing was cool and decided to raise their profile by using it. I remember seeing the movie *Colors* — the story of two L.A. cops waging a war on gangs of black and Hispanic youths — in the 1980s in Calgary. The next thing I knew the streets

of Cowtown were overrun by a bunch of cowpunks wearing white sleeveless undershirts, pants hanging low off their hips, held up with a belt, and only the top button of a madras shirt fastened. Some of them were even wearing hairnets. They were all calling each other "homey."

I ruled the hip-hop theory out though, after realizing that the *South Park* episode in which the phrase first appears ("Cartman Gets an Anal Probe") was originally broadcast in 1997, which places it before *Quannum Project*.

Digging further I discovered "my bad" in two popular movies released in 1995. *Bad Boys*, starring Will Smith and Martin Lawrence and directed by Michael Bay, came first. It was followed a few months later by *Clueless*, written and directed by Amy Heckerling and starring Alicia Silverstone.

The one thing they had in common was California — not surprising for a place that popularized the use of the terms "dude," "dope," and "phat."

So I went there — or at least to the College Slang Research Project, at California State Polytechnic in Pomona, which "centers around the use of slang as a communication means by college students." On their list of the top 20 most popular slang terms used by college students in the spring of 1998, "my bad" ranked number seven.

I still don't know who first came up with the phrase, but there's no question that it's now reached the masses — thanks to the media, and TV in particular. Aside from *South Park*, I've heard the phrase on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ("Faith, Hope and Trick," air-date: Oct. 13, 1998) and *Spin City* ("Bye Bye Love," air-date: Jan. 7, 1997). The literary arts must also take at least some responsibility: in his book *Ghostwritten*, published in 1999, David Mitchell, a British writer living in Hiroshima, has one of his characters, a late-night radio jock in New York, say it.

Further proof it's reached critical mass? It's being abbreviated as "MB" in online and e-mail correspondence and in chat rooms. Marketing gurus only wish they could create such a viral effect.

So what's next? According to the College Slang Research Project, the biggest word on campus now is "tight." ("Generic positive: Great, awesome, wonderful, perfect, cool, attractive, nice. I saw this snowboard the other day that was so tight!")

Some people have told me they despise this stuff, but I find it refreshing. Saying, "Sorry, my bad," is a tight alternative to having to say, "Mister, I'm really sorry I ran over your cat."

Blaine Kyllö improves his word power by working for Arsenal Pulp Press.