

Cry Uncle

The term "to cry uncle" or "holler uncle" was first recorded in 1918 and has origins in North America. There has been no real evidence that this phrase was ever really used in the UK. The term, today, means to surrender to someone else's will, most often during a physical confrontation. The word "uncle" has been used to mean the same thing in this context.

The confusion about the origin seems to revolve around the word "uncle" which some theorize is derived from the Old English verb "aingid", which means "protects". It would stand to reason that someone in trouble, being beaten up or defeated would cry out for protection. The confusion, at least for me, was trying to bridge the gap between this phrase AND the family title of "uncle".

The word "uncle" we use today (as in good ol' Uncle Stew) is probably Old French, the first recording of it happened around 1290. I have found some dictionaries stating the Old French is based off of the Latin word "avunculus". I think this is probably for the family title of "uncle", Latin is the bases for a lot of words and there are roots for this title in German, Danish, Swedish and Dutch. I should mention, the Welsh term "uncle" actually meant the first cousin of either parent.

So, how do we go from "your parents siblings" to "surrender"?

The meanings are two distant in definition. To me, "uncle" and "cry uncle" must have developed separately or had a similar branches.

Interestingly enough, there is no sign of the term "cry uncle" in Europe (at least not recorded) even though there are roots for the word "uncle". This indicates that the word could have been developed much later in America. There is an Irish word "anacol" which means "an act of mercy" which some attribute to the phrase "cry uncle" which, in the great melting-pot of America, could have been said enough to be mispronounced into "Uncle! Uncle!" meaning "Mercy! You got me! Ouch!"

Satisfied? No! I would argue that in a close-knit society, someone in trouble might actually call out for someone they could trust, a family member. I love mispronunciations, but, I felt there was something similar between fighting and family members who aren't your parents. Also, because the Latin word "avunculus" means "brother of one's mother, uncle from the maternal side of the family" AND any adult male relative. Any or/and situation is worth digging into.

And because I read other theories when in Irish-land. Story time!

It is said that Roman youngsters might have developed the phrase when in trouble, probably when they were in trouble or being bullied or in a state of defeat. It's not necessary to call for someone's aid when you are winning, after all. The phrase they used was "patrue mi patruissime" or uncle, "my best of uncles". Probably used to gain favor if the person attacking was older or to yell at someone older and bigger to come help them. The reason you don't see "avunculus" is that Latin word meant your mother's brother. The phrase "patrue mi patruissuim" referred to your father's brother.

So, there actually IS a break in the family title that in English, at least, doesn't exist today. A uncle is a “neutered” term and it was the word “avunculus” that moved on to inspire the Old French and yada yada (just not the Welsh, crazy Welsh).

It is possible, as with all words, the phrase went unrecorded but was still used by common folk throughout Europe and was written down in America first. There is evidence that the Romans used this phrase the same way as we use it today as an exclamation of the need for help to a family member who would, of course, bail you out.

Unfortunately, factually, scholars only have enough proof to attribute the term “cry uncle” to America and no one knows where it came from. Although, we probably can safely say why.