9/12/2020

Can I Get That in English?

A primer in "Mechanic Speak"

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Language is a fabric that ties us together as a people more than ethnicities and nationalities and has both unified and divided civilizations for millennia. Try to put yourself in the shoes of an American citizen who primarily speaks a language other than English. Would you be more comfortable amongst a group of English-speaking Americans or a group of non-Americans who speak the same language? Or consider the Bible story recounting "The Tower of Babel" in which men, united by language, conspired together in disobedience to God to build a "Tower to the heavens." God ultimately foiled their attempts by confusing their language. The result? The tower project was abandoned, and people scattered across the earth grouped according to their language. Whether you believe this story to be true (as I do) or see it as a myth or fable, the point remains the same. The way we speak is deeply integral to who we are as people.

Like differences in language each industry has its own unique lingo and sometimes that lingo can be even more perplexing than a foreign language because we can understand the words, but the words seemingly have no meaning. Ever talked with someone from IT? In the realm of confusing industry-specific lingo the field of auto mechanics is one of the worst offenders which makes for double trouble when your car is broken. "I'm already stressed about my broken car and now I have no idea what this mechanic is talking about." It's a one-two punch! Let me pull back the iron curtain and shed some headlights on this crazy issue.

How to explain the problem to the mechanic

Before we even need to worry about understanding what the mechanic is saying we first have to figure out how to explain the issues our car is having. This can be super daunting, but it does not really need to be. Here is a simple trick… **stick to the symptom**!!! What I mean is, in your own words describe the problem, not what you think is wrong. I would love to have an old lady say something crazy like, "Sometimes when I'm waiting at a stop light, I hear a sound like someone was holding their breath and then let it out." I can work with that! It is very descriptive even though it is not technical and that is fine. Stick to words you know well and are comfortable with to describe the symptom. Remember, at this stage it is all about you communicating to the mechanic.

Some people think they need to master the lingo and be technically proficient about their car's problem in order to communicate the issue to the mechanic, but this leads to more miscommunications than you can imagine. Sometimes we start throwing around mechanicky terms we think we understand but they have a totally different meaning to the mechanic who has no idea we mean something else entirely, and why would he question it when we "seem" to know what we're talking about. The next thing we know he's done work on our car that we didn't want and hasn't fixed our issue but he expects to be paid anyway because he did exactly what we (unknowingly) told him to do!

Here is a classic: The car is shaking at highway speeds. We ask for an alignment. Mechanic performs said alignment. Car still shakes at highway speeds. We come back inquiring as to the piss-poor

nature of the mechanics abilities. Mechanic pulls up a printout of our alignment specs to show the precision of his workmanship. The spec sheet is just totally incomprehensible, but we look it over with him to maintain the ruse. Finally, in exasperation we exclaim, "Well it still shakes on the highway!" and he fires back, "You brought it in for an alignment not a shake!" Oh man, now everybody's mad and the car still isn't fixed. Do you see what happened? The "symptom" is a shake on the highway, but an "alignment" is a specific mechanical operation completely unrelated to a shake. We really didn't understand exactly what an "Alignment" really entailed and would have been better off to say something very descriptive but totally in our own words like, "Around 62mph the car starts to shake. I see the passenger seat back shaking and I feel it in my seat, but I don't feel it in steering wheel very much."

So, stick to the symptom! It is a bad idea to spend an evening in the very treacherous land known as "Google" and come in asking for a specific repair. For sure use the internet to be as educated as possible just don't confuse research with diagnostics. A good mechanic is good at his job, but most are not psychic. They must start by understanding what symptoms you are experiencing in order to accurately diagnose and repair the problem.

Common Automotive Terms

Once you start learning how to identify and describe a symptom it is helpful to be up to speed with some basic automotive terminology. While a shake, leak, or noise are pretty straight-forward symptoms to describe, your car may have other symptoms requiring accurate use of verbiage to describe. Here are a few common terms:

Engine Cranking- This one is really critical and is often confused. As an illustration, think about Henry Ford's original Model T. Those cars were started by manually cranking a literal hand crank on the front of the car to rotate the engine and get it started. It was Charles Kettering, of Dayton fame, who designed the first reliable self-starter with the help of his "Barn Gang" and marketed it to Cadillac. Kettering's idea was to use an electric motor to "crank" the engine in place of the manual hand crank and his design has remained essentially unchanged. So, to "crank" the engine still means the same thing it did back in the Model T days. It is just rotating the engine to get it started. Have you ever run out of gas and kept turning the key just hoping it would start? That "ru ru ru ru ru" sound you heard was the starter cranking engine. Here is why this is so important: An engine that will crank over but not start has a totally different problem than an engine that will not crank at all. You might be thinking, "Hey Mr. Mechanic, just put the key in and see what it does. Stop asking silly questions." Unfortunately, it is not that simple because cars often fail in a way that is very intermittent, meaning the problem does not act up all the time. If you are stranded somewhere because your car will not start it is critical that you note if the engine is actually cranking when you try to start it because what can happen is you get it towed to a shop, it starts right up, and then the mechanic needs to know from you if it would crank in order to diagnose the problem. To accurately describe this symptom, you must know the difference between an engine that would crank but not start and an engine that would not even crank.

Turn Over- This is actually a synonym for cranking which is often confused to mean starting or trying to start. If the engine's cranking it is turning over. They mean the same.

Hot/Cold- Typically if a mechanic asks if the problem happens when it is hot or cold, he is referring to the engine temperature rather than weather conditions. Sometimes weather conditions are

important too but just know that if you do not clarify your mechanic will interpret hot/cold as relating to engine temperature.

Refrigerant vs Coolant- Refrigerant is a gas which makes the magic happen in the cars AC system. This is not Coolant. Coolant is an antifreeze/water mixture which circulates throughout the engine, radiator, and heater. If you roll into a shop asking for your coolant to be filled up, do not be mad when it only takes the guy two minutes and your AC still does not work! Remember to stick to the symptom. Asking for fluids (like coolant) to be checked and topped off is still a good thing to do but that is different than describing a problem.

Diagnostic- This word is so vague and overused/misused it retains almost no meaning at all. Certainly, any time a car has a problem the mechanic will need to "Diagnose" the source of the problem. That just means he has to figure it out. Some people have the idea that there is some all-knowing, all powerful, super-computer that can be hooked up to a car to run a "Diagnostic" wherein all the cars ills will be suddenly revealed. Unfortunately, this is not the case! Mechanics have a variety of different electronic gadgets to test for a variety of problems but the self-diagnostic capabilities of even the most advanced cars is still far more limited than most people realize.

Trouble Codes- When a warning light or message comes up on the dash indicating a problem the car's computer will store information related to the fault. This information is categorized in alpha-numeric sequence which is referred to as "trouble codes" or just "codes".

How to train your mechanic to speak English

Well, we've learned how to communicate to our mechanic and even learned some fancy terms to clarify the process but it all goes to pieces when the mechanic comes back and says something like, "When I was raising it up something popped in the back and what I found is a broken coil on the right rear but it hasn't hurt the tire and you got a split stab link so we really ought to do both plus both the outers are loose which is why the tires are all chopped you got some seeping around the stat but it's prolly okay for now brakes are down to 3mil and when did you do the timing belt cuz it's way overdue if hasn't been done." What the what?! Slow down, Gomer! Can I get that in English? Seriously though, any mechanic from any shop could walk up to any mechanic in any other shop and rattle that bunch of nonsense off and be 100% understood. So, what do we do when they try to communicate with us like they communicate with each other?

First off, we need to be confident we can trust our mechanic as he is trying his best to accurately portray the state of our car and just needs some help to solidify his message. If you cannot trust your mechanic, you need to switch mechanics! My cousin likes to tell me, "You guys are just like dentists. You tell me I need things and I just have to take your word for it!" That is true so assuming we can trust our mechanic we need to worry less about understanding explicitly every aspect of the work he's recommending and get him to begin prioritizing the work according to four categories: Repairs related to our original request, other repairs needed, safety issues, and maintenance. We can also ask about what repairs need to be done if we are only keeping the car for one more week, month, year. This brings an immense clarity to the situation because now we can look at all the recommended work as individual chunks of cash that we can arrange in a way that makes sense for our budget, our plan for the car, and the cars value. It is no longer necessary to fully understand exactly what it means to replace a

broken stab link if we know how much it costs and where that job is prioritized relative to the other work needed.

So, what are these four categories? First, “Repairs related to our original request”. This is just whatever repairs are necessary to fix whatever thing we brought the car in to have fixed. It could be a noise, AC inop, engine running rough, whatever. It does not matter what the mechanic calls the repair as long as he can say, “It’s this many dollars to fix your original request.” Call it what you want, a widget, a flux capacitor, you name it. It just does not matter.

Next, we have “Other repairs needed”**.** These are things that are physically breaking down or in the process of breaking down. It is really great to have this information even if we elect not to perform these repairs and often the mechanic can help us evaluate when these repairs will become a priority and when they can be put off. “Mr. Wilson, I noticed (insert incomprehensible lingo here) will need to be replaced in the next year or two.” “Thanks, Mr. Mechanic, but I’m trading this baby in 6 months from now.” Sometimes, though, these “other repairs” trump our original request like when our original request really is not all that critical, but the mechanic found something else that really is critical. If we can only afford to do one it makes sense to shelve our original request.

Third, are the safety issues. Nobody wants to talk about this because it is a little scary and there are definitely some disreputable mechanics out there that prey on this fear to make sales. Genuine safety concerns need to be addressed ASAP. These are not items to wait on although sometimes the mechanic can shed some perspective. Like maybe safety issue X should really be categorized as “Other repairs needed” but if we do not address it in the next 3 months it will turn into a true safety issue. Have you ever seen a car on the side of the highway with the front wheels splayed out like a dog on an icy sidewalk? I always wonder how many times a mechanic brought that safety issue to their attention but they disregarded the warning because they either figured he was trying to rip them off or they really couldn’t understand what he was saying.

Maintenance is the last category. Maintenance more accurately called “Preventative maintenance” are the services we do to prevent a mechanical failure in the future and to help our car live a longer life. Some of these items are important and some less so. If the mechanic is recommending maintenance items just ask, “What will happen to my car if I wait on these?” Maintenance is usually the lowest priority of the four categories. That is not to say that maintenance is unimportant but if you cannot afford all the recommendations these are usually the items to wait on. Every car has a maintenance schedule included with the owner’s manual, so it is pretty easy to double check these recommendations.

Well there you have it. You are now an expert in mechanic-ease, sort of. At least you can relax a little more the next time your car starts making a funny sound or that dreaded light pops up on the dash. Don’t stress; you got this!