

Hello. I'm Daniel Brint. Welcome to the Upper Street TODAY language talk, a weekly podcast about English language, expressions, idioms and any other topics of interest inspired by TODAY's subject.

It's that time of the year when the clocks change and we have to get used to shorter days. And the first of November is Prime meridian day. I'd like to take this prime opportunity to talk about the meridian, a London borough and lines, in general.

That London neighbourhood is the borough of Greenwich, one of those British place names whose spelling gives few clues to pronunciation. You might be familiar with it if you have ever visited the Greenwich Royal Museums complex which includes the Cutty sark and the Observatory, where you can find the meridian.

Beginning in 1884, the Greenwich meridian served as the basis for the world's standard time zone system. The French were not very happy with that, by all accounts. Had they known it would become a major tourist draw, they might have resisted even longer. The mean solar time (i.e., the average time when the sun crosses the meridian) was defined as Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) from 1884 to 1972, when it was replaced by Coordinated Universal Time (UTC). Indeed, GMT is commonly used erroneously when it should in fact be UTC.

Nowadays you have to queue and pay for the brief privilege of standing astride the famous line while taking the inevitable photo to share on Insta.

I was lucky enough a few years ago to be visiting someone who works in the Observatory. Greenwich Park is a London gem. As you walk up to the top you get fantastic views of London across the river, and the financial district, affectionately dubbed 'Gotham', with the famous naval college below (now a music school) past and present coexist in a visual setting perhaps unequalled anywhere else in this vast city.

The strip of metal set into the ground to mark 0° longitude was closed to visitors that day due to some renovations being done to a nearby building. It was a glorious late spring sunny morning and the flowers and trees were vivid with life. Ironically, it was a timeless sensation, if there's one thing the observatory is defined by, it is time.

With privileged access and the absence of visitors I sat alone and pondered the significance and power of this much visited and highly evocative spot that gave us two hemispheres, is the starting point for measuring distance and the basis for global time zones. Until my companion, coming back from a meeting, and seeing the focus of my attention, disturbed my reverie with a simple and brutally accurate comment: "it's just a line' He said, and added, 'It's arbitrary. It could be anywhere.'

And that's often the thing about lines, isn't it. They are so often arbitrary markers of ideas, directions, power or abstractions as much as physical limits.

Like the meridian itself, they set rules and determine obligations. Notice how we say you have to toe the line when your behaviour or actions are restricted. Your 'toe', a rather odd metonymy for the person and their actions, should know its place. If you decide to disobey, you cross the line, or, in an image of military indiscipline, step out of line. We've heard of 'lines being drawn in the sand,' or of politicians who do – or do not – 'follow the party line.'

Lines, like borders, are as much about not belonging as they are about belonging.

Borders are often determined by geographical features, however in cartography and probably in the way we think about countries we imagine they are in fact more or less straight line separating one state from another. It's hard to determine exactly how psychologically sensitive we are to the existence of arbitrary lines. Some animals in areas near old-policed borders and fences in eastern European countries still won't cross where the lines were set, even years after they were taken down. At some level, human beings might be just as conditioned. The symbolism of the wall in right-wing American propaganda would seem to suggest that's the case.

We also think of lines as the future consequence of where we are now, another abstraction, so we talk about doing something further down the line or along the line. Investigators might decide something is a line worth following. Like Greenwich, a line can relate to both time and space. (1.45)

One further use of line worth addressing is the linear sequence of words on paper. In the days before instant messaging, it was common to 'drop someone a line,' quite literally drop your letter or postcard in the post box. As 'drop' doesn't really resonate in the age of social media, it is, unsurprisingly, used less and less. Lines are what an actor learns, and you can forget your lines when making a formal speech or notice that someone has rehearsed and practised their words – so line crops up in seduction or sales – someone has a line, or tried an old line, or has a pick-up line.

Finally, the line as writing and line as obligations and commitments, come together nicely in the expression 'sign on the dotted line' which usually comes with a promise to abide by terms and conditions. Which is what we do when we reset our clocks and watches.

I don't know how you are supposed to celebrate Meridian Day. I think I'll reread Charles Dickens' wonderful description of the Greenwich Fair Holiday. Whether or not on purpose, Dickens can't help thinking about time in this iconic setting of the observatory and after detailed description of the fun, games, signing and drinking of the fair he quietly reflects as the sun sets that:

The spot, which half an hour ago was ringing with the shouts of boisterous mirth, is as calm and quiet as if nothing could ever disturb its serenity: the fine old trees, the majestic building at their feet, with the noble river beyond, glistening in the moonlight, appear in all their beauty, and under their most favourable aspect; the voices of the boys, singing their evening hymn, are borne gently on the air; and the humblest mechanic who has been lingering on the grass so pleasant to the feet that beat the same dull round from week to week in the paved streets of London,

