

## What about this strange word; ‘Shibboleth’

All of us are familiar with the word *shibboleth*, which was taught to us during the lecture on the secrets of the second degree. Our first introduction to this odd sounding word is when we are told that it signifies plenty, and is usually depicted by a sheaf of wheat or ear of corn at or near a stream of water. The next usage of the word is during the lecture by the Senior Deacon.

We are taught that the story behind the word *shibboleth* and its origin is recorded in Book of Judges Chapter 12, verses 1-15, where two Semitic tribes, the Ephraimites and the Gileadites, were at war with each other. The story relates how the men of Gilead defeated the Ephraimites during this great battle and set up a blockade to catch any fleeing enemy soldiers. The sentries were under strict orders that if a person passed their way claiming not to be an Ephraimite that person was asked to pronounce the word, *shibboleth*. The reason being the Ephraimites who had no ‘sh’ sound in their language could not pronounce it properly but called it *Sibboleth* which unmasked them as enemies and cost them their lives.

Scriptures inform us that on that day 2,040 Ephraimites were slain. As *shibboleth* was then used as a test word to distinguish friend from foe, King Solomon afterwards caused it to be adopted and used in all Fellowcraft Lodges. That’s the simplified story behind the word *shibboleth* and its Masonic usage, a shibboleth is simply a linguistic password, a particular expression or pronunciation. It identifies a member of a group, or in Masonic terms, a Fellow of the Craft. A shibboleth is a way of speaking that identifies someone as a member, or perhaps a non-member, of a particular group.

So the purpose of a shibboleth is exclusionary as much as it is inclusionary: A person whose way of speaking violates a shibboleth is identified as an outsider and is thereby excluded by the group. Not knowing the word would exclude that person advancing from the First to the Second Degree.

However, the use of a shibboleth is not peculiar to Freemasonry and while it is true you might not have heard that word used outside of our Masonic community, a form of it is there, and is used frequently to distinguish different social groups, in fact there are shibboleths all around us which identify speakers of a particular group or subculture; shibboleths can also be customs or practices.

As noted, the first recorded shibboleth is in the Bible and was used to identify the enemy during a great battle. This method of testing a person to see whether or not they are friend or foe during time of war is a common practice and has been used down through the years by a wide variety of military personnel. Here are a couple shibboleths that have been employed in times of battle.

**LOLLAPALOOZA**, this shibboleth was used throughout World War II by the United States military during the battle with Japan to try and distinguish Japanese spies. The Japanese have some difficulty in pronouncing the letter ‘L’ and it would sound more like the letter ‘R’, making the shibboleth Lollapalooza sound like *Rorraprooza*, thus distinguishing the speaker as Japanese.

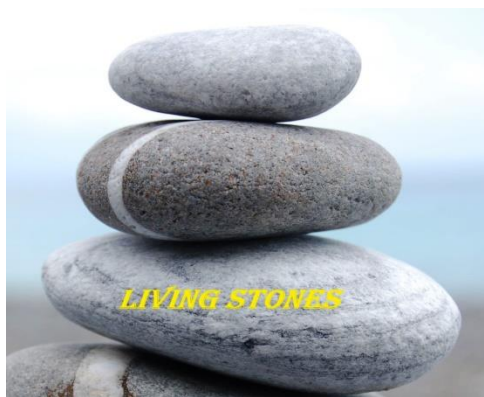
**YKSI**, this is the Finnish for ‘ONE’, and during the Finnish Civil War it was used by the Finnish white guard to determine Russians from Finns. Many Russians that were caught had changed into civilian clothes, so all those that were suspected of being Russian were interred and asked to say the word ‘yksi’. If a prisoner pronounced the word ‘juksi’ they were found to be a Russian, and dealt with accordingly.

**FLASH – THUNDER – WELCOME....**you may have heard these words used in an American war film, for these were some of the challenge response codes used by the American forces at the Battle of Normandy during the Second World War. The words were used to identify the challenger as a native English speaker and not an enemy, as the Germans would pronounce Welcome as ‘Velcome’.

During the Victorian era in Britain the educated middle classes invented several shibboleths to set them apart from the lower classes. One of these was pronouncing the suffix ‘*ing*’ as it is spelled, rhyming with sing, whereas the lower classes pronounced it as ‘*in*’, rhyming with sin. The sophisticated middle classes knew immediately that the person using a word such as *dancin*’ and not *dancing* was not of their class. Take the word Unionised....this was introduced to distinguish scientists from charlatans. When reading the word aloud with no context, a scientist will always pronounce it as Un-ionised, whereas a non-chemist will pronounce it union-ised, thereby exposing the imposter. So, you see, there are different types of shibboleths used in many different types of situations.

The song by our Brothers, George and Ira Gershwin, ‘Let’s call the whole thing off,’ is play on shibboleths, “*You say Tomayto and I say Tomahto, you say Potayto, and I say Potahto. So, a shibboleth in fact can be defined as any word, or any usage of language that can identify a person’s region of origin, or identify him as a member of a certain group.*

Our Masonic shibboleth is very important to our Craft, and demonstrates a sense of belonging, and a means of detecting those who don’t belong. I think we are better off for the use of them. Shibboleths are all around us and in everyday use, and they are more common than you might think.



*Living Stones - Masonic Thoughts for Today’s Mason*  
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