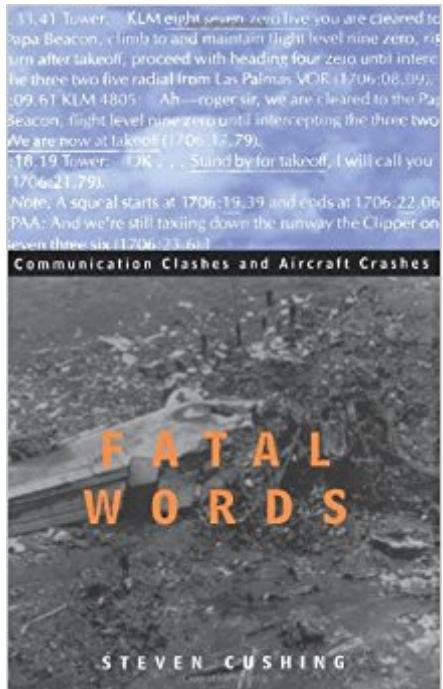


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# Fatal Words: Communication Clashes And Aircraft Crashes



## Synopsis

On March 27, 1977, 583 people died when KLM and Pan Am 747s collided on a crowded, foggy runway in Tenerife, the Canary Islands. The cause, a miscommunication between the pilot and the air traffic controller. The pilot radioed, "We are now at takeoff," meaning that the plane was lifting off, but the tower controller misunderstood and thought the plane was waiting on the runway. In *Fatal Words*, Steven Cushing explains how miscommunication has led to dozens of aircraft disasters, and he proposes innovative solutions for preventing them. He examines ambiguities in language when aviation jargon and colloquial English are mixed, when a word is used that has different meanings, and when different words are used that sound alike. To remedy these problems, Cushing proposes a visual communication system and a computerized voice mechanism to help clear up confusing language. *Fatal Words* is an accessible explanation of some of the most notorious aircraft tragedies of our time, and it will appeal to scholars in communications, linguistics, and cognitive science, to aviation experts, and to general readers.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Fatal Words" is a totally unique book, and it is impossible to pigeonhole. Is it a book on transformational grammar for linguists? Is it a book of miscommunications, and the resultant impact on aviation safety? Is it a book on computer programming? Actually, it's all three. I bought the book to read from an air safety standpoint, given that I am an airline pilot. I found the book very interesting but very tough reading in parts, and occasionally a bit unfocused. The book is in three

parts, plus a very long technical appendix. The first part concerns itself with language use, and includes many examples from not only NTSB Accident Reports, but from ASRS 'Callback' (published by NASA) that were from incidents. Although I generally agree on all his points and would highly encourage all pilots and Air Traffic Controllers to heed his warnings (and to examine their speech for potential errors of the types Dr. Cushing points out) there are a couple of minor exceptions I take to statements he makes or assumptions he has about pilot-controller language use, particularly in reference to the word "hold" in the Air California gear up landing accident. Overall, though, it is a brilliant analysis. Part two is similar to part one in that it focuses on communication problems not related to language (numbers, radios, etc.). Both parts one and two are four chapters long per part. The analysis in part two is my favorite part of the book, and relates issues such as transposed digits, limitations of radios, the 10 versus 11 problem so common in altitude violations, etc. This is the part that has unparalleled insight into pilot-controller communications interactions and the foibles that can result. Every pilot and controller should read part two.

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