

Can I get a roll tide: The history of the popular phrase

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Ace a test? Roll Tide. Catch a fish? Roll Tide. Step in new puppy pee on the wooden floor? “Well, Roll Tide.”

“It’s thoroughly invaded my family,” said Coady Latimer, the University of Alabama student

known during home football games as “Captain Crimson.” Though his immediate family members are from Florida and are avid fans of the Florida Gators, they’ve adopted the phrase and use it often, sporting it on t-shirts and using it to bemoan the lack of available breakfast foods. It’s been exchanged to end phone conversations and uttered when the Internet went down.

Latimer and his family say “Roll Tide” so often that “it’s not like it has a certain use or anything like that anymore,” he says, which only further confuses those who didn’t grow up scheduling family weddings around SEC football games.

“Roll Tide” is less straightforward to decipher than the classic “Go [mascot]!” or “Go [school name]!” that is a general phrase of support for one’s school sports team. If that were the case, Crimson Tide supporters would shout “Go Elephants!” which is the mascot the football team adopted after a blow-out game in 1930 against this weekend’s competitor, Ole Miss.

With less than 50 percent of the student population hailing from the state of Alabama, some unfamiliar freshmen and new faculty need time to adjust to the new colloquialism, particularly when outside of sports situations.

Over the course of a day or so, a simple Facebook post inquiring the context of everyone’s most-recently-uttered “Roll Tide” invoked nearly 40 responses from UA students and alumni, describing all types of situations: gross, exciting, weird and football-supporting, to name a few categories. The phrase comprises the name of the athletics website (RollTide.com) and has its own category under “UA Traditions” on the website for first-year students (fye.ua.edu).



Studies and research have not yet pinpointed how and when “Roll Tide” exited Bryant-Denny stadium and sun-salutationed its way into the typical concluding “Namaste” at a Tuscaloosa-area yoga studio. Catherine Evans Davies, a professor of linguistics in the UA Department of English since 1989, said the presence of “Roll Tide” as a phrase used in these ways demonstrates that the University of Alabama represents a discourse community.

“[Discourse community] is a flexible term that you can use as a way of talking about people who share ways of speaking,” Davies said. “So the people who enter it from the outside then have to figure out what the rules are.”

Understanding the social and linguistic rules of using “Roll Tide” emerges from the setting where the phrase is first learned. As a freshman, that is generally somewhere along the admissions process, particularly if the student chooses to come to school on a tour. The usage of “Roll Tide” also becomes increasingly obvious after watching a game with other Crimson Tide fans.

Dorothy Worden, an assistant professor of applied linguistics, is new to Tuscaloosa and the English Department this year. As a linguist and newcomer, she identifies “Roll Tide” as being a cultural key word, which tend to carry more weight than others used by a group.

“[Cultural key words are] words that are either used exclusively by a particular group or more commonly by a particular group, with the idea being that those words, if you investigate them, can tell you something more about that culture,” Worden said. “I do think that ‘Roll Tide’ probably qualifies as a cultural key word, because it carries so many meanings and fulfills so many functions. I think it becomes in some ways perhaps emblematic of the culture of the University and the football team and all of those things.”

The exact translation of “Roll Tide” in many situations may not be clear to its users, though it suggests that the user is identifying with the community surrounding football at the University, Davies said. The association to football is more clear, since the phrase originated as a means of cheering on the football team.

How the Tide started Rolling

Alabama football began with a game in Birmingham on a Friday afternoon in November of 1892. According to the Paul W. Bryant Museum, the team was originally referred to as “varsity” or “Crimson White,” inviting headline writers to popularize “Thin Red Line” until 1906.

Alabama tied Auburn 6-6 in 1907 after playing a tough game in red-clay mud, and “Crimson Tide” was born. The “Why Crimson Tide?” section of the Bryant Museum website states that Hugh Roberts, the former sports editor at the Birmingham Age-Herald, coined the term. “Crimson Tide” was then further popularized by Zipp Newman, former sports editor of the Birmingham News. (In 1930, Everett Strupper of the Atlanta Journal described the team as ‘elephants’ when they stomped over Ole Miss, and the mascot stuck.)

The football team didn't garner national acclaim until a game in Philadelphia in 1922, where Alabama defeated the University of Pennsylvania 9-7. Wallace Wade became the coach the following season.

Then, the December 1925 edition of *Rammer Jammer*, a student literary and humor magazine, had a section for "Of California and Greetings" where it referenced the Crimson Tide going "to California to show the natives a few tricks," and implored the readership to be with the team in spirit because "why, in the name of all that is patriotic, should we let a small matter of three thousand miles keep us from being with the Crimson Tide in their sortie?" Wade's Crimson Tide returned with its first National Championship title.

In response to this, the magazine held a contest for a new song, and "Yea Alabama!" was born from winner Ethelred Lundy (Epp) Sykes, then editor-in-chief of *The Crimson White*. Sykes won \$50 for writing the replacement to "Swing," an early score from Washington & Lee University that was used as a fight song by many football teams. *Rammer Jammer* stated they had no power to make the student body embrace the song, but asked that it be played on occasions necessary for a battle march, and "if it is liked, for the students to accept it."

The score to the song and profile of Sykes were published in the May 1926 edition of *Rammer Jammer*. "Yea Alabama!" includes an opening verse that is not sung today, but what Sykes labels as the chorus is true to the current tune, with one exception: Although "roll" appears in the line "Go! Roll to vic-try!" and the Crimson Tide is what's identified as "Dixie's football pride," the two chants of "Roll Tide!" that are now attached to the end of the song do not appear in Sykes' original score.

The First Year Experience website, fye.ua.edu, states that "Roll Tide" was used at some unidentified point to illustrate the team running onto the field, but the concrete transition from this description to a commonly used phrase that is now trademarked by the University and licensed and marketed by the Collegiate Licensing Company is unclear.

Somewhere in between, though, the phrase attached itself to the fight song, in between lines sung in "Sweet Home Alabama" and "Dixieland Delight," and integrated into multiple football stadium cheers and daily usage.

How the Tide Rolls (off the tongue)

In 2010, ESPN debuted a commercial of people in various situations saying "Roll Tide" to one another: heading into a convenience store, shaking hands, leaving the car, getting a speeding ticket, passing the ketchup, winning a pageant, sitting in a hot tub, giving a toast at a wedding, signing off from the morning news, kissing on a date, and – Latimer's favorite – closing a funeral.

"It's far beyond football," Latimer said. "It means more than just, 'Go Alabama' or 'Go Bama.' It's that 'we're a family, and we have something to join around' kind of thing."

By illustrating just how many situations “Roll Tide” is appropriate for, it becomes apparent how it could be difficult to provide an exact translation to anyone who isn’t already part of the University of Alabama discourse community.

“What it makes me think of is this idea called pragmatics, which is a really important part of studying how languages get used in contexts,” Worden said. “So the idea with pragmatics is a lot of what we mean by what we say is not in the words itself, but it’s within the social community and the shared understanding that allows us to interpret what’s being said.”

The phrase “Roll Tide!” can be translated into a more complete thought instead of a sort of interjection by adding a comma: “Roll, Tide!” is an imperative, telling the implied Crimson Tide to roll. But when not said in this way, with an intonation that clearly is exhorting the Tide to roll, Davies suggests breaking the phrase down by its function.

“As a sociolinguist, I would say [Roll Tide] clearly has social meaning for the group in terms of signifying identity and allegiance to a particular group,” she said.

Davies concluded that the entity – saying ‘Roll’ and ‘Tide’ together – serves about five functions: a greeting, a membership check, a concluding utterance, a congratulatory utterance, or as a way to signify carry on, or keep on rolling, she said.

Greetings and concluding utterances open and close conversations and events, while a membership check would be said, for example, if someone else was wearing Alabama clothing and one person wanted to identify the other as belonging to the group. An example of a congratulatory utterance would be saying it as a way of celebrating a good grade on the test. Finally, when expressed as a way to keep moving on (think the dog pee on the floor or that speeding ticket), “Roll Tide” would translate to “carry on” or “keep rolling.”

How to Roll with the Tide

Entering into this discourse community from another area can take some time. Meaghan Baril, a junior majoring in English and psychology, is from San Diego, where she paid some attention to a couple National Football League teams, but never to college football. She received a scholarship to attend UA and decided to attend after taking a tour of the campus. She had heard of “Roll Tide” before moving, but didn’t have a grasp on what it meant until later into her freshman year.

“When I moved down here to actually come to school, we stayed in a hotel in Birmingham, and one of the guys that was helping with my suitcase asked, ‘Oh, are you here for school?’ and I said, ‘Yeah,’ and then he said, ‘Roll Tide!’” Baril recalled. “Then I was like, ‘Um, thanks.’ I didn’t know what you were supposed to do. Then I started to catch on pretty quickly, but the first few times it was definitely awkward.”

Baril said her grandfather misremembers the phrase when she goes home to visit, but that her friends have become acquainted with what it means through her posts on social media. She has grown accustomed to saying it herself, particularly on football weekends.

“For me as a sort of outsider to the ‘Roll Tide’ thing, or as someone who’s just becoming aware of it, I know what the words mean, but I’m still learning the social context that allows me to interpret those words and all the different things they can mean where it sometimes is a cheer and sometimes it’s the equivalent of saying, ‘Good luck’ or any of those things,” Worden said. “All of that just depends on the context in which it’s being used.”

Once the context of “Roll Tide” is understood, the discourse community isn’t completely refined to the geographic location of Tuscaloosa or even the South. On a trip to Europe, Latimer exchanged “Roll Tide” with someone who noticed his Alabama sweatshirt outside of a pub in Dublin, Ireland. Earlier in August, Yellowhammer News featured Hani Imam, a former UA student who returned to his hometown in Jerusalem and opened an Alabama-themed store. The front has a sign that reads “Welcome to Bama Country,” and Imam said he greets customers with a “Roll Tide!” nearly 50 times per day.

Davies said that the storied history and traditions associated with Alabama football could contribute to the strength of “Roll Tide” as a phrase, as well as the choice of newcomers to use the phrase or continue using it when they leave the area and return home.

“What I would assume that [Roll Tide] signals is that this person who’s choosing to do this is signaling with language that the person, he or she, is part of a community that’s associated with football in relation to the University of Alabama,” Davies said. “But then again, we don’t know exactly what it means to be used. For some people, they probably never think about it. It’s just something they learn how to say, which is part of being in this discourse community.”

Roll Tide.