

Ever wonder why we say "Merry Christmas" instead of "Happy Christmas"?

Happy Birthday! Happy New Year! Happy Easter! Happy Hanukkah! Happy Friday! Merry Christmas!

Odds are, you probably just played a quick game of "Which one is not like the other?" with the phrases above, causing you to ask this question: Why does the word *merry* only apply to Christmas?

Mental Floss had the same question, which is why they collaborated with Arika Okrent and Sean O'Neill to produce [an entire video](#) on the subject. Essentially, what they created is a history of the word "merry," providing you with a series of December-related fun facts you can pull out at any holiday party.

It turns out that *happy* and *merry* have similar definitions, but different connotations. *Happy* is [seen as](#) an emotion, as the person who's always smiling and looking at the bright side of things. As for *merry*, that [refers to](#) the action of merrymaking, probably leading you to think of that one friend who loves to dance, drink, and party it up whenever they get the chance.

For the most part, you can think of *merry* as a showing of happiness. But, why do we only associate this lively term with Christmas? I mean, doesn't it seem like more of a New Years, party animal-type word?

Well, now it's time to hop in our time machine...

Merry is a word that's much older than *happy*. Traditionally, it was used to describe anything that was "pleasant" or "agreeable." For instance, a sunny day could be *merry*. So could a mellifluous tune that's played on the piano.

Later on, *happy* came along and was based on the noun "hap," which is [a synonym for](#) "luck" or "fortune." That could definitely explain why "Happy New Year!" became a part of our collective language.

While both meanings changed over time, *merry* and *happy* were also jointly used in Christmas greetings. Although, when it came to other holidays, *merry* did not appear as often. Notably, it was used to say "Merry Shrovetide!" – which is the English [equivalent of Mardi Gras](#) and makes sense based on this holiday's party-time atmosphere.

Sadly, *merry* was used less frequently during the 18th and 19th centuries. However, it was still a key part of phrases such as "make merry," "the more the merrier," and – of course – "Merry Christmas!" There were some people who still said "Happy

Christmas!" during this period of time, but *merry* was the popular choice in [Dickens novels](#), carols, and anything else that became associated with the ideal, Victorian Christmas.

Since the Victorian era quintessentially influenced many of our holiday traditions, *merry* became distinctly associated with Christmas. In fact, the last line in Clement Clarke Moore's *The Night Before Christmas* was changed because of this. Originally, it [read](#), "Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!" (Mind. Blown.)

On the contrary, England takes a different approach. During the first Christmas radio address, King George V used the word *happy* instead of *merry* (you can actually listen to the original recording [here](#), which is pretty cool). Since the King said it, that led everyone to believe that *happy* was the well-bred, high-class choice – while *merry* was connected to rowdy Dickens characters. One critic [even said that](#) *merry* had "a ridiculous excess of sentiment."

Since Americans were less concerned with King George V, they stuck with *merry*. Over time, it became such a patently festive word that anything else would sound odd in its place.

To see all this interesting info paired with cool illustrations, you can watch *Mental Floss'* video below:



Now, one thing's for sure: *Merry Christmas* will never sound the same to us, ever again.

[Image via New Line Cinema]