On groking mundanes (again)

Like many native English speakers I have limited language skills. I am often astounded at the range of tongues that people in different countries speak, happily for me oil industry meetings are mostly conducted in English (or more precisely American-English). So my inexcusable linguistic limitations have not significantly impeded my chosen calling.

However, even within the constraints of English there are many different variations. I don't just mean the way it is spoken in places like America, Australia, India, England and, for example Glasgow. I mean the language as it is used by teenage girls, high fashionistas, IT gurus and management consultants. Recently this was made clear to me, I was speaking to an

> **grok** /grok/, var. /grohk/ /vt./ [from the novel "Stranger in a Strange Land", by Robert A. Heinlein, where it is a Martian word meaning literally `to drink' and metaphorically `to be one with'] The emphatic form is `grok in fullness'. 1. To understand, usually in a global sense. Connotes intimate and exhaustive knowledge. Contrast zen, which is similar supernal understanding experienced as a single brief flash
>
> *From "The Jargon File" version 4.2.2*

Italian (whose English was impeccable by the way) and had to stop myself using the word "grok". Now I stopped myself not because she was Italian, but because I realised that, like most people in the oil industry, she would never have heard of the term. As a computer programmer who worked on Artificial Intelligence projects and Lisp Machines in the 1980s I "grew up" in a different culture than most people in the oil industry. When I'm discussing things with certain people I can employ terms like "YMMV", "bodge" and "tarball" to parcel a whole raft of meaning quickly where bandwidth is restricted, but I would assume only a limited audience would be familiar with such terms. Other words like "glitch", "spam" and "orthogonal" have seeped into wider acceptance, so I often unthinkingly assume that anyone familiar with computers would understand them. These terms (and many other aspects of this particular culture) have been documented in places such as "The Jargon File", a collection of definitions, myths and observations that has been continually updated since 1975 and is widely available on-line.

Of course everyone has a unique combination of experiences, I am told that the sentence "your femslash crack ship drabble is AU not canon" makes perfect sense in some specialist on-line communities (that is YA fanfic, which is not a world that I have ever looked at). In this case most of the terms have meanings that are peculiar to this specialised context, but the word "canon" has pretty much the same meaning as its definition in the Jargon File. In fact it is common for different specialists to share terms, often, as with the term "canon" here, employing a word to mean pretty much the same as others do. However, it is not unusual for different specialists to also employ the same words to have completely different meanings. In the oil industry there are some terms such as "metadata", "data owner", "enterprise architecture" and even "well" that suffer from this issue. We can have a perfectly sensible conversation with geoscientists, executives and IT types where these terms are used and as a result each participant comes away with a completely different understanding.

My unusual background ensures I frequently get surprised when, what I consider to be a widely agreed term, has a different meanings for an audience that has other experiences. In order to understand and be widely understood I have learnt that I have to be more paranoid about the language used and to clarify even the things we all take for granted.